This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

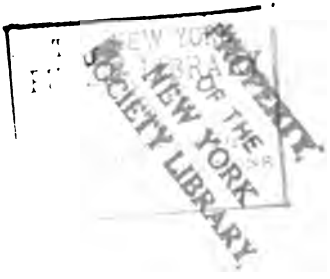
Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES
3 3433 07493936 8

MIDSUMMER MAGIC

WALTER BAMFYLDE

Annvat
NEW-YORK
SOCIETY
LIBRARY
1758


PROPERTY OF THE NEW YORK SOCIETY LIBRARY

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK LONDON
The Knickerbocker Press
1[illegible]

Drawn by Ralph Willis

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK LONDON
Knickerbocker Press
1915

MIDSUMMER MAGIC

BY

WALTER BAMFYLDE
AUTHOR OF "THE UPLANDERS"

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK LONDON
The Knickerbocker Press
1915

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY
96237B
ASTOR, LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS
R 1940 L

COPYRIGHT, 1915
BY
WALTER BAMFYLDE

PROPERTY
OF THE
NEW YORK
SOCIETY LIBRARY

The Knickerbocker Press, New York

F

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Midsummer Eve	1
II.	The Charm	13
III.	The Moon Looked on	22
IV.	Love Spreads a Feast	30
V.	Dawn	41
VI.	The Rosemary Girl	52
VII.	Links in a Long Chain	62
VIII.	The Man	78
IX.	The Woman	93
X.	Half a Secret	107
XI.	A Philosopher in Corduroy	118
XII.	An Offer of Redemption	131
XIII.	Fortune Turns an Unexpected Corner	139
XIV.	Brown Eyes	149
XV.	The Fight	164
XVI.	After the Battle	177
XVII.	Familiar Faces Vanish	195
XVIII.	Sally Burdock Takes a Step	209

CHAPTER		PAGE
XIX.	Clouds Gathering over the Valley	220
XX.	A Confession	229
XXI.	Two Go Walking; One Goes Riding	236
XXII.	Visions and the Flesh	249
XXIII.	The Vision Embodied	263
XXIV.	Trains are Laid	274
XXV.	The Two Women	287
XXVI.	The Letter	300
XXVII.	Behind the Hedge, and Beyond	308
XXVIII.	Night in Many Places	324
XXIX.	And the Morning	338
XXX.	Waiting	356
XXXI.	Adam as Knight Errant	366
XXXII.	The Mending of Broken Vessels	379

MIDSUMMER MAGIC

Midsummer Magic

CHAPTER I

MIDSUMMER EVE

"I can drive a cow or guide a plough,
And I can reap and zow;
I'm as fresh as the daisies in the fields,
And they calls me 'Buttercup Joe'!"

It was an old voice, queer and quavering, that carolled the song of youth and vigour. The tones cracked across the hot and dusty roadway, passed into the churchyard, and died away in the shadows of a hundred yews.

Every door and window of the inn was flung open to its widest in the hope that a cool breath of air might come down from the hilltop and stir the atmosphere that stood, packed and hot and heavy, beneath the low ceilings. Yet the kitchen, with its solid stone walls and hanging eaves, was cooler

than the ale bench outside; and mine host, Jim Watkin, had brought the three earliest of his evening cronies indoors. He now sprawled on a chair by the open window, fleshy, rotund, and sleepy-eyed, watching a wrinkled, crinkled, crumpled old peasant, who had danced as a bridegroom in Trafalgar's year, shuffling through the steps of a dance on the sanded floor.

"Ther'!" gasped the old man, dropping into the corner seat of the high-backed settle; "ther's for 'ee, now! You can tell 'em that Sol Gosling can tip a stave and rattle heel-an'-toe with any of 'em."

"Wonderful!" said Jim; "a regular masterpiece for your age, gran'feyther; you've took on a new lease of life."

"Threescore and ten, I be," cried Sol.

"And seven shill'uns a wik and a nice cottage. Folks as is left money lives long; don't 'ee think so, Adam?" Jim winked—a sleepy wink—at a burly fellow whose clothes, smothered in yellow stone-dust, betrayed his calling as flour writes the trade of the miller. Adam was stonemason, carver of tombstones, and sexton to Swainswick. Old Sol peered at him anxious for his answer. The big mason was moody and a man of few words. He merely nodded.

"Be that 'yes' or 'no'?" asked Sol, his mind suddenly in a flutter lest Adam should be dreaming of chiselling his epitaph.

"Yes," answered Adam.

"Ah! I was always a good friend to 'ee since the day ye come here a little nameless boy," said the ancient ingratiatingly.

Adam's eye shot a look of anger at the allusion, but his momentary wrath died at the sight of the short-breathing, huddled figure on the settle. "The longer ye live the better I shall be pleased," he said.

"And them's lucky words to hear from the sexton," added the landlord.

"Well," said Sol cheeringly, "they do say that a man's just as old as his legs. Here be I, walked to Sheepdene on the hottest day of the year, and that, too, on a job that might make any man's knees tremble; I'm back again, with wind enough for a song, and lissom enough for a jig. I do feel just about in merry-making trim, I can tell 'ee." And Solomon Gosling struck up another song.

"As Í was góin' to márkut
Upoń a màrkut ḋay,
I ḿet a víllage ḿaiden
And shé were góin' that ẁay.

Yes, trippin' along the way, sir,
Wi' butter and eggs was she,
So we strolled along together
Singing, tiddy-fol-li-fol-lee!

Now, as we walked along, sir——"

"Good-evening, Mr. Gosling!" A face in a sunbonnet and as pretty as any flower peeped in from the passage, laughter on the red lips and mischief in the brown eyes.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Sol, "why, 'tis Sophie. How be you, my dear?"

"Nay, 'tis how be you and your fortune, Mr. Gosling," laughed the girl.

"Both as right as rain, and praise the Lord for all!" cried Sol. "Ay," he went on, turning to the rest of the company, "I feared that the old missus had no power to leave I that bit o' money."

"Tush! law is law, and wills is wills," said Adam.

"Not always," replied Sol. "You see, the Sheepdene lands be tied to the family as tight as the crown be tied to the king. I knowed that, and I knowed that Miss Merrett would never have let a penny or a blade of grass go to this nephew if she could have helped it. Missus was oncommon familiar wi' I always. When I was no higher than my knees be now I used to fetch her the cows for

the milkin'; she was but a slip of a wench at the time. We growed together, like; me in the kitchen and she in the parlour. I knowed what Sheepdene family law was, and so I feared that perhaps she hadn't the power to order anybody to pay I money wik by wik."

"But it is all right, gran'feyther, isn't it?" asked Sophie.

"Ay, my dear, 'tis all right. I went over to see the new maister, and drat me if he didn't laugh outright when I axed him the question. Lord! the dance that money have led I. Night after night I've dreamed of shill'uns; seen 'em rollin' and runnin' about for all the world like live things, and I've chased 'em, bless 'ee, upstairs, downstairs, along the street, through the churchyard, and down the hill. I've grabbed and they've dodged, and I've woke up in a muck o' sweat and with empty hands; that's what have worritted I, neighbours—empty hands!"

"How about the new maister?" asked Jim; "hast sized 'un up?"

"I have, to an inch," was the emphatic response. "And I say it solemnly, within sound of the church clock, that he doan't look true Christian!" Sol glanced round to see the effect of this astounding declaration. "I be glad," he added slowly, "that

none of us be so dark-visaged as that young man."

Sophie Watkin was visibly interested and came right into the room and sat down. Adam watched her, and his brow darkened. "What's his name?" he asked harshly; "let us hear if ther' be Christian sound about it."

"His name is Jasper Barrow."

"That's good enough," said Sophie, "and it sounds well."

"He's dark, yellow-dark," pursued Sol, "hair and eyes as black as midnight, restless wi' hands and feet, always gettin' up and sittin' down; bores 'ee through and through with his looks, and sings songs in a tongue nobody in Swainswick ever heard afore."

"Sounds heathenish," growled Adam.

"As for his looks, you shall judge for yourself, for he's coming to stay with thee, Jim, this very night."

Sophie uttered an expectant "Oh!"

"What's the matter with Sheepdene House?" asked the stonemason.

"Too lonely, and the shadow of death over it. The young maister wants light and company. To-morrow, he says, he will look round for a housekeeper and a couple of maids to make the big old

place lively. That reminds I that I ought to be lookin' out for 'un. Sophie, my dear, I'll just have a quiet pint on the ale bench."

"So you shall, gran'feyther." Sol walked out with the girl beside him. The skirts of her dainty muslin dress had hardly disappeared when a sharp voice—that of Adam—called her back again. She turned instantly and reappeared with a smile, and a musical "Yes, Adam," on her lips. The man stared, flushed beneath his tan and coating of yellow dust, and, for what seemed a full minute, made no reply. A sigh escaped him before a word came. "Why do 'ee come so quick upon the call, and—and like this?" he said huskily. "Do 'ee never have a frock that ain't pretty, an apron that ain't white and smooth? Can't I see 'ee sometimes with a frown in your soft eyes and no plague of red roses in your cheeks?"

The maiden laughed. "Is that all you want to say, Adam?"

"No, put out a cup of ale for I; I'll join Sol."

Sophie disappeared, and her father looked reflectively at his morose companion. "Dost expect to woo a wench in that fashion?" he asked.

"How can I take a wife when I have no name to give her?" was the reply.

Watkin shrugged impatiently. "What's the matter wi' 'Adam Stone'?" he asked.

"Just this," replied Adam, "who gave it to me? My godfathers and godmother in my baptism?"

"No," said Jim, "and I suppose ye were properly christened like the rest of us."

"I was nearly twelve months old when I was left in a bundle on Caleb Dodd's doorstep," was the savage reply.

"Ay, ay, old enough to have a name and too young to remember it," said Watkin soothingly, "that's poor luck for a big fine man like you. Still, 'Adam Stone' sounds well."

"Ay, 'Adam,' because nobody could trace me any other father, and 'Stone' because I lay on the lap of a doorstep, and my foster-father carved tombstones." Adam laughed a mirthless, bitter laugh.

"Yet Caleb kept thee, loved thee, and left thee two good trades. Take a wife; if not Sophie, then somebody else. I doan't know as my girl would——"

"She wouldn't!" was the abrupt reply. "All I wish is that she would hate me. If I knew for dead sure that I stood no chance, then I might give over dreamin' of her day and night." The stonemason stood up, a fine, deep-chested figure

of a man with ruddy-brown, curling hair. Sophie's laugh rippled in. He turned to the innkeeper. "Jim, doan't let her wait on this Jasper Barrow to-night."

Watkin laughed. "Sheepdene's maister is from gentlefolk."

"Ay, ay, and blood will hunt after beauty!"

"You'm a fool!" snapped Jim. Adam turned sharply and stalked into the passage. Sophie passed him. He didn't speak, but the big brown hand went out furtively to touch her dress.

Solomon Gosling was not alone on the ale bench. His "fortune," his new billycock and Sunday smock, the shill'uns in his deep pocket were like sugar to flies, and Swainswick was lining up on the bench beside him. The thirst of a dry midsummer was upon man and beast. For twenty days the hills had been bathed in a flood of sunshine that streamed down from an unclouded sky. The short grass that covered scarp and trench of the old world camp on the Beacon had visibly browned. Upland pools were fringed with a ring of baked mud; springs that had gushed merrily a month before now trickled a half-hearted tinkle on to the worn stones. The evening air was vocal with the bleating of sheep beside the shallowing pools and along the edge of the brook.

The sun had now dropped down behind the Beacon and was sinking to the westernmost rim of the wide valley of the Severn, whose waters, yellow and full with the evening tide, were flowing with loop and twist and curve away to the channel and the open sea. Southwards, the high perched windows of Hillborough gleamed ruddily in the sunset; but northwards, the dense woods of Pottersham, dropping to the bottom of the shaded hollows, were darkening for twilight and the night of Midsummer Eve.

Jim Watkin's house, the "Yew Tree," swung its sign almost opposite to the church gate, proudly displaying in dark green against a background of woolly cloud a representation of one of the ancient yews that had sentinelled for many a generation the trim "God's acre," where parson and yeoman, squire and hind, mingled their man dust with the Mother Earth that had reared them all. Clinging to the wind-swept uplands in clusters of grey stone, and screened from the big river valley by the Beacon and the outflung range of hills, Swainswick lived a life apart from its neighbours. There was a family atmosphere over the little grey village, and its manhood, gossipy, sociable, with every evening the drouth of a hard day's toil in its throat, loved to sprawl a sunny portion of its

allotted span of life on the ale bench of the old inn, above them the painted emblem of the dark tree, that would cast its shadow across their last resting-place when gossiping days were over. It was comforting to think that an old crony left behind would sometimes blink dreamily across the white roadway and remember the last quart of ale he had shared with him who lay sleeping the long, long sleep under the sombre and evergreen yews.

This evening there was something more tasty than the usual village chatter. Old Sol had a tale to tell, and he told it; there was a stranger within the gates, one with the strong-running upland blood in him, yet mixed with that which was foreign to them. Whence he came, none knew, though some remembered his mother, a wild, impulsive younger sister of the Miss Merrett who had ruled for thirty years at Sheepdene. "When a family runs only to women for a whole generation ther'll be strange faces beside the hearth," said Dicky Babs, the diminutive cobbler.

"More especially when only one girl marries, and she runs away and marries foreign," added Aaron Giles, the wheelwright. "I'm expecting a face that won't look at home at Sheepdene."

"And ye'll get one," said Sol.

At that moment a clatter of hoofs echoed out of the twilight, and Jasper Barrow reined up opposite to the inn.

CHAPTER II

THE CHARM

THE surprise of the young gentleman's dramatic appearance produced a sudden silence that was broken by Aaron Giles muttering. "Talk of the devil—" he began; "and the squire comes a-riding," finished Dicky Babs in a whisper, his eyes fixed upon the figure in the roadway. Adam Stone turned to Watkin. "Pulled up like a gipsy showin' hoss tricks at a fair," he said, and stepped into the roadway and went across to his cottage by the gate of the churchyard.

Jasper Barrow glanced up at the inn sign, then ran a roving eye along the ale bench. Sol stood up. "Ah! there you are, Gosling," Barrow called cheerily.

"And landlord's expectin' 'ee," answered Sol. Watkin stepped forward: "I'll see to the horse myself, sir, if you will go inside." Barrow swung himself from the saddle and stood for a minute in the white roadway. Tall, lithe, and without an

ounce of spare flesh upon him, he looked every line of the picture of restless activity that the old man had drawn. The sallowness of his skin was unmistakable, but there was a flush of red in the cheeks that took away all semblance of unhealthiness. The bunch of cronies looked on with interest and some admiration. The stranger was utterly unlike any one else in Swainswick, and a startling contrast to the flaxen Merretts, to whose lands he had succeeded, but there was breeding in the fine limbs and the clear-cut features and command in the tones of his voice; and no man is so quick to notice the signs of "quality" as the stolid peasant with his sheeplike eyes. Every man stood up with Sol as the newcomer walked to the doorway.

Jasper Barrow accepted the instinctive token of respect with a supple bow and a pleasant smile. "Good-evening to you all," he said.

"Good-evenin' to you, squire, and pleased we be to welcome 'ee," replied the wheelwright.

"That's true!" added Solomon emphatically.

"And I take it very kindly and neighbourly," said Barrow, a quick glance from his dark eyes resting on each face in turn. To Solomon he said: "See that your friends have whatever they fancy to drink my health, and then come to me." The

young gentleman disappeared within the darkening doorway, all eyes following him.

"His blood be the right colour if his face bain't," exclaimed Giles.

"I'll be proud to make shoes for 'un," said Dicky Babs. "A pretty foot he've got; I didn't take much stock of his face."

"There's some as mightn't like the colour on't," exclaimed Sol, "but handsome is as handsome does. I'll give 'ee Miss Sophie's word about his looks as soon as I have heard it." So saying he went crabwise up the step to send out the ale and then seek the presence of his new patron, to whom he had gone that afternoon fearful of the security of his "seven shill'uns" pension and the tenure of his tiny stone cottage.

Sol's hopes had been almost at nadir that morning; his happiness touched the zenith before Jim Watkin shepherded him down the dark street two hours later in the hot June night. Mr. Gosling needed guidance and a steadying hand, an unusual condition of affairs in his humdrum life. The west country peasant is seldom a toper; his day-long labours in all winds and weathers are cheered with rough cider or the smallest of small beer doled out from the farm kitchen in the morning. Upon this he works with the patience and strength, and

almost the silence, of the plodding ox, for the farm labourer is the solitary shepherd, the plougher of the lonely furrow. If, in the evening, he foregathers with his fellows at the village inn, it is with no thought of tippling. He will warm his soul with a more generous brew than that which custom bestows upon him during working hours; but his quart or his pint is often shared by another, and his potations are ruminating in character; he drinks slowly, a short pull and a long pause, and the home-brewed trickles into an unspoiled stomach; moreover, his brain has not been trained to that fine-spun texture that wilts and warps at the touch of alcohol. Jim Watkin did an unaccustomed thing when he piloted the straying legs of Mr. Solomon Gosling to the little stone cottage where Jane Gosling sat grim and hard-lipped awaiting him.

The old man had spent the evening of his life. The young squire had supped heartily, waited on by the deft hands of pretty Sophie Watkin, and it was some time before Solomon received his summons to the parlour. But once safely within the door, comfortably installed in an elbow-chair and in the light of the candles, a cheerful glow upon his furrowed face, his heart warmed and his tongue wagged freely. The new master of Sheepdene was,

in an unusual sense, a stranger to the hills of his people. He was full of eager questions. None knew the rolling uplands and the nestling valleys better than the old peasant, and once his tongue was loosened from bit and bridle he talked with all the wandering garrulity of age. When he answered questions he rummaged amidst the cobwebbed stores of his memory to find the bits of embroidery that are needed to decorate the woven fabric of the true tale. During the last half-hour, Jim Watkin and his daughter, Sophie, joined the company. Sol was busy with Swainswick myth and legend, filled with the old man's pride of the past. He little knew how momentously he was shaping the night to the lives of some in the valley. "The world wags on too fast," said he, leaning forward and pointing a finger of warning; "the man that's always a-runnin' won't find sixpences in the gutter. Ther's a mortal sight that's learnt, and a mortal sight that's forgot, look ye."

"That is to say—?" put in Barrow.

"Why, this is Midsummer Eve," replied Sol, bringing his fist down on the table.

"We can still find 'un on the almanac," said Jim.

"And what do the almanac tell 'ee?" asked Sol. He turned to Sophie. "What do it tell ye, my pretty?"

"Why, that the moon be in the second quarter and three days off full," answered the maid.

"And that don't shape nothing in your mind?"

"Nothing, gran'feyther."

Sol shook his grey head. "I'll tell 'ee what it said to my missus in Trafalgar year, fifty years ago; ay, and it said the same to many a bonny wench in them days. Do 'ee ever dream of sweethearts, my dear?"

Sophie blushed. "Sometimes, gran'feyther."

The old man smacked his lips. "That's a healthy sign. Well, now, 'tis Midsummer Eve, and the moon growin'. When the moon grows, the man grows; when she wanes the man weakens. Ye've heard that, Jim?"

"I've heard the women tell on't; and I know 'tis a good sign if a boy comes when moon be growin'."

"So 'tis; so 'tis! I comed with a growin' moon, and here I be, threescore years and ten, and as hearty as hearty. But it bain't that sort of time with Sophie yet; 'tis t'other time, just as it was with my old woman fifty years agone. Shall I tell 'ee the tale?"

"Certainly, certainly," said Jasper, turning his body slightly in the chair so that he might get a better view of Sophie's pretty face.

"Well, then, in the old days afore folks got so

much book larnin' as to make 'em foolish they knowed that the moon wasn't hung in the sky just to light us to bed so many nights in a twelvemonth. Why, come to think on't 'tis a cracky notion to stare at the man in the moon's face with they two big black eyes of his'n and think he sees nothin'."

"Reckon it is," said Jim thoughtfully.

"Ther's some as 'll tell 'ee he bain't a man at all!" cried Sol angrily. "'Tis that sort o' dratted foolishness that do make I fair mad at times. But ye'll be wantin' the tale, Mr. Jasper."

"If you please, Mr. Gosling."

"Well, 'tis a maid's tale more'n a man's. Midsummer Eve is the pretty maid's night of nights. If the moon be growin' 'tis the time of her life. She must go into the churchyard and wait for the clock to strike twelve. In her hands she must have rose-leaves or some yarb like rosemary; 'twas rosemary my Jane used; for a maid of quality rose-leaves be best. When the first stroke do sound on the bell she must start to run round the church scatterin' the yarb or the roses and singin' just softly like to herself:

'Rose-leaves, rose-leaves,
Rose-leaves I strow;
He that will love me,
Come after me now!'

"If the maid do look behind her the charm won't work; 't wouldn't be nat'ral if it did. Four times must she run round, then go through the gate and away home. Quick as quick must she put a snow-white cloth upon the table, with ale, and bread and cheese, and a plate for one. Settin' the door wide open she must then sit away in a corner. If it be willed that she's to marry that year, the young man will walk in through the open door, eat the supper, bow to her, and go out, never sayin' a word."

"And you did that?" asked Jasper.

"I did, maister. I had been out tending some sick sheep and was hurryin' home thinking more of ghostes than aught else. To tell 'ee the truth I was hoping to be past the churchyard afore the clock struck, and 'twas when I was castin' a fearful eye over the wall that I seed Jane. I'd been sweet on her since the Christmas Feast, but reckoned she favoured Joe Blake more'n she did I. But ther', the hand of Fate was in it and I ate the supper whilst Joe was snoring. Next mornin' I met Jane as she was goin' to milkin'. We stops. 'D'ye mean it, Solomon?' says she. 'If I doan't,' says I, 'then nothin' never meant nothin'.'

"'Gi'e us a kiss, then,' says she. I gi'ed her dree, and we had the askings read out o' Sunday."

Sol buried his hawklike nose in the ale cup; Sophie blushed and sighed, and Mr. Jasper Barrow sought advice from the ceiling. "Fifty years agone, that be; fifty years this very night!" said Sol.

"And 'tis nigh ten o'clock," hinted the innkeeper.

Mr. Barrow withdrew his gaze from the ceiling. "We will fill a bumper to all the pretty maids in Gloucestershire. Will you be cupbearer, Miss Sophie?"

"No," exclaimed the maid rising in some confusion. "I will go to bed. Good-night to 'ee all!" She slipped from the room and Jim went for the ale. It was this final bumper that unsteadied Mr. Gosling's legs and sent him quakingly home to his charm-bride of fifty summers ago.

CHAPTER III

THE MOON LOOKED ON

WHEN Jim Watkin returned he found his guest standing on the steps before the door, enjoying the gentle breeze that began to steal down from the hills and drinking in the beauty of Swainswick beneath a midsummer moon. It was a saying of Mr. Jasper Barrow that he had either been kissed or cursed by the fairies, for he loved the night better than the day. It was fairyland along the sloping hills and in the broad furrowlike valley that lay between them. Across the road the fine old church was picked out as clearly as a carven model; the graceful spire was a grey silhouette against a wash of pale steel-blue, and the immemorial yews flanked it in silhouette of a green that was almost black.

In sinuous lines along the climbing streets, clinging lightly to the slopes of the hill or nestling cosily in the hollows, were the houses of grey hewn stone, solid and comfortable, and housing a placid,

slow-feeding, slow-thinking type of the Saxon uplander. Here and there a light shone redly against the pure silver of the moon, but for the most part Swainswick was soundly sleeping, the youths and the maids, maybe, dreaming of a lover or a mistress, but utterly forgetful of the magic that lay in the rising moon, midnight, and the eve of sun's longest day in the heavens.

"Smells a bit cooler, sir," said Jim, as he reached the door.

Barrow breathed in deeply, then laughed—a light, somewhat hard laugh, that his simple host had already noted and rather disliked. "I get drunk through my nostrils and eyes," he said; "an intoxication from air and light and the splashes of the rainbow that dot the earth."

Watkin smiled indulgently. "That means 'ee bain't going to bed, sir."

"Not yet, not yet; give me space and room for the far-away shadows."

"Ther' was all that at Sheepdene, Mr. Barrow, corners for ghostes and groanings and creepy things."

"You wonder I didn't stay there, eh?"

"Maybe I do."

"Well, I'm not afraid of the dark or the deep corners. I shall love Sheepdene with its echoing

chambers, whispering passages, jutting gables, and wide-spread roof. Yet I had no mind to sleep there to-night. Were the Merretts timid folk, Watkin?"

"Never knowed any but the women, and ther' was little they feared."

"Not superstitious?"

Watkin rubbed his chin. "We all have our fears and our fancies, sir."

"Exactly; I have mine. How far is it to the top of the Beacon?"

"Just a nice walk. Go straight along the road beyond the houses and strike left up the open hill. You'll see the camp lines well against the hill to-night."

Barrow turned away up the street, passing the lines of silent houses and coming out upon the highway that ran wide and straight along the shelf of the uplands.

A few minutes brought him into the open country, and he stood upon the road lulling his senses with the soft hues and lines and veiling shadows of the fairy picture spread before him. It was lovely in what it revealed, but to Barrow lovelier still in what it hid from him; and the silence was the witch-glamour over all. With a sigh he turned and climbed towards the camp.

It was a place for the ghosts of the age-long dead to walk uneasily to and fro or stand sentinel over that sleeping human world that the ages had evolved from the rude hearth-circle that had been theirs. And Jasper was of the old earth and the past, its touch in his fingers, its call in his ears, and its half-clad soul looking out of his black eyes.

Mr. Barrow smoked his pipe and enjoyed it, scarcely noticing the silence in which the soft pulse of his own breathing was a distinct sound.

The striking of a match and a sudden springing up of a tiny flare. Jasper looked at his watch—half-past eleven—he had been on the hilltop about an hour. As not even a ghost was likely to come out to keep him company he thought of bed and sleep as desirable things and decided to seek both.

The descent to the village was easy and gradual and the church clock chimed out the quarter before midnight as he reached the open road. The spell of the night and the moon was still upon him. Instead of seeking the inn door directly he went to the churchyard and stood looking over the low wall.

The clock pointed to twelve. In the silence there came a faint "whirr" from the tower and then the echoing boom of the first stroke of the witches' hour. Jasper held his breath, for there was more

than a taint of ancient witchcraft in his mixed blood. Suddenly something white issued from the church porch, paused for an instant, then began a hesitating movement that was hardly a run from west to east around the venerable pile. The looker-on was startled, but only for a moment; then the figure being hidden by the church, he vaulted the wall and dodged between the graves to the shelter of one of the yews. In a minute the thing appeared again, running swiftly, noiselessly, and to his mind fearfully. He caught the drone and sing-song of a chant uttered with insufficient breath:

"Rosemary, rosemary,
Rosemary, I strow;
He that shall wed me,
Come follow me now!"

It was a variation of the charm that old Gosling had sung hardly two hours before. Who was the singer? Some lovelorn village wench? Sol had stated that "rose-leaves" were for the "quality," and "rosemary" for peasants, such as his own sweetheart of a half-century ago.

The girl appeared at the beginning of her third circle and the last stroke of the magic "twelve" went echoing and sighing over hill and dale. She

was now running with the speed of a fawn as though eager to be over with the uncanny business, and Jasper saw that she was slim and graceful, with a wealth of brownish hair; some instinct told him that she must be pretty also. When she passed he darted out, snatched up some of the rosemary leaves, felt the soft down on their underside, crushed them with his fingers, and inhaled their pungent, camphor-like odour. A volatile spirit seemed to leap out of them into his brain, completing the intoxication of his senses. The runner came for the last time. "*Come follow me now!*" were the words she panted as she flew past. And the man—the hunter, the savage, and sex all suddenly alive in him—laughed a laugh of joy and dashed after her. She heard his laugh and the fierce mastery that rang in it. A cry in which the fear—if not the terror—was unmistakable, broke from her lips. She flew for the wall, sprang over into the lane, bent her body low as though to hide it, and raced from her pursuer. He laughed again, braced himself to the hunt, and ran on.

To him it was no question of the ancient rite of bride capture; it was the sheer lust of the chase, the following through of a strange adventure—nothing more. The silly wench was some cottager's daughter tempting the devil to reveal a bucolic

lover. She should have a surprise; and the huntsman? Well, he would take what came to him, if the award was pleasing to his senses.

The maid sped away from the main village on the hill, following a downward lane which Barrow dimly remembered to have ridden earlier in the evening. He recollected, too, a neat garden, a straggling orchard of gnarled, old, and unpruned trees, and a gabled stone house with dormer windows, to whose sills the ivy climbed. The fleeing girl was heading in that direction.

It was no part of the hunter's purpose to capture her upon the road, and he was fleeter of foot than she, although she ran well and with no suspicion of the heaviness of the country working girl. So far as he could tell she never once looked behind, so that either fear or superstition was keeping her true to the letter of the midsummer myth. Probably ten minutes had elapsed since the commencement of the fourth magic circle round the church, and the chase had covered a steep and winding mile. He heard the sound of the mill stream at the bottom of the valley. The house of the garden and the dormers rose up out of the moon mist behind its wall and the girl turned in at the gate. Jasper spurted—stones flying before him—and reached this point of

entrance just as the white figure disappeared through the doorway. The door remained wide open. The man held to the gate for a moment to recover his breath, then walked firm-footed up the flagged pathway and entered the house.

CHAPTER IV

LOVE SPREADS A FEAST

MR. JASPER BARROW found himself in a narrow hall lighted only by the rays of the moon, which was by that time riding rather low to the summits of the western hills. It was a passage rather than an apartment, running apparently from front to back of the house and dividing it into two portions. He felt rugs beneath his feet, and their softness suggested something more than mere comfort. The walls were smooth and painted, the glass of a picture shining here and there, and ram's horns or bull's horns marking the opening for every doorway. Into which of these had the girl gone? Save for the slow ticking of a grandfather clock no sound broke the stillness, and the silence within walls is a more oppressive thing than the silence of the open world without. Jasper stood, peering into the shadows and listening intently.

Ah! the scrape and snap of a kindling match. A shaft of light shot into the hall from a door about

halfway along the passage. The man, alert for a sign, stepped forward upon the soundless rugs. His heart and brain drummed audibly to his ears, and a wondering that was stained with a splash of apprehension blurred and thickened his senses; he, too, was playing with the unknown, and there was enough of superstition in him.

He stood in the doorway of the room; one swift look took in its comfort and cosiness, then his gaze centred upon the vision he had hunted. The girl stood by a round oaken table lighting a pair of candles in heavy brass candlesticks that shone like pale gold. Her face was flushed from running, her abundant hair a little in disorder, her round bosom heaving quickly, her hands visibly trembling. The table was laid with a dainty supper, roses red and white filled two bowls, and a sprig of rosemary stood in the empty glass. The face was visible now, though partly turned from him, for she was bending over the candles. The profile was perfect from the smooth brow to the rounded chin and the curve of the throat below. The lashes of the eyes hid their colour, for they drooped almost to the flushing cheeks, but Barrow's lips framed and almost uttered the word "beautiful! beautiful!" Swiftly came the thought, "Why should such an one be dabbling with midnight

witchery?" He felt that his chase had been an impertinence and that his presence in the door was a gross intrusion. What right had he to be standing in that silent house at such an hour facing the beautiful stranger! Or, rather, he was the stranger and she in the sanctity of her home. An impulse of delicacy prompted him to turn on his heel before she should look up and find him there, but a movement of her own arrested his intention and held him where he was. Without raising her head or her eyes she suddenly moved from the table farther into the room and seated herself in a low chair near to the window which was uncurtained and looked into the orchard. Her face was now turned completely away, but there was the richness of her clustering hair to remind Jasper of what the face had revealed.

He looked at the table. A chair was placed; it was of a high-backed make, and the brown leather had darkened with usage almost to black. The cloth was spotless and spread only across the half of the table nearest to the door. The supper was not the homely ale and cheese that Solomon had found prepared for him. There was a plump chicken browned to a delicate shade that would have made an epicure lick his lips, white bread, dainty pastries, a wedge of the primest and ripest

"double Glo'ster," and a dish of bush fruits from the garden; a quaint jug of brown earthenware was filled with ale, but a slender bottle of wine stood like a lordling beside it. A place was laid for one.

Jasper now felt that it would be rude and unmannerly to decline the silent invitation. He stepped to the table, bowed to the still figure in the chair, sat down, and began to eat; to his surprise he found that he was really hungry, and felt almost a loathing of his appetite that could assert itself in the midst of so strange a romance; the moon and the maid seemed to be apart from the earth; he was a coarse creature that had strayed from the hills, with an animal hunger and thirst prodding him to give them quick satisfaction. He spread his plate liberally, pushed the ale jug aside, and sent the wine bubbling red into his glass. He dipped into it the sprig of rosemary and drank a toast in silence. As he ate he tried to recall every point of Solomon's story. He knew that a word would break the spell; was a look into each other's eyes also forbidden? Solomon had said nothing to the rustic Jane until milking time the next morning, and then they had straightway plighted a troth that bound them as solemnly as marriage. Must he—Jasper—call upon this

handsome maid when the sun rose? She had never looked at him; would she recognize him, know him, receive him? If he dared not speak she would not even know his voice? Had she, like Jane of fifty years before, been calling upon a laggard lover? How would she regard the stranger that her incantation had called up?

He stared at the silent figure in the chair. There, of a truth, was beauty, there also was a measure of wild daring. She was playing her part in the midnight drama of divination. What thoughts throbbed in the brain hidden away in the beautiful head with its clustering hair?

The old clock in the hall struck a warning "one, two, three," on its smaller gong. Three quarters of an hour after midnight! Jasper rose up; the girl heard him, but did not stir. It was his duty to bow his thanks for the love supper and then steal quietly away. He would not do so without an attempt to make her look at him. How was this to be done if she resolutely kept her back towards him? Moreover, he wanted to see her face fully; he must know the colour of her eyes.

Once again he filled the wine glass and picked up the sprig of rosemary. A quick warning not to do what he intended sprang into his mind. He thrust it aside and strode to the window, placing himself

directly before her; her face was in the shadow, the gleam of the candles full in his own eyes. The wine was in his hand. Dropping on one knee at her feet, he lifted the glass to his lips and drained it; then he took the rosemary, plucked a leaf from it, and laid it in her lap. She bowed her head a little lower as though in token of acceptance, but her eyes remained downcast; he only saw that her hands were white, delicately shaped, and the fingers ringless. He stood up again, bowed, and walked to the door of the room. On its threshold he turned with a swift movement from the hips. The girl had not changed her position in the least. He walked out into the night, the sprig of rosemary in his hand.

Jasper Barrow had no curiosity about the house itself, and passed into the lane without even a glance at the windows. He closed the gate after him, and when he had done so the thought came to him that he had, by a sign, barred the right of ingress to any expected lover—if such existed. For just a moment he stood, half resolved to wait and see whether the girl came to fasten the door, but such an act seemed to lack the spirit of chivalry or even fair play; so he turned his face to the hill and the village and walked quickly away. His pride was a little piqued because the maiden

had not looked at him. It was hardly possible that she had seen him when he rode from Sheepdene, and utterly and absolutely impossible that she should dream that the new stranger, owner of the Merrett lands, would be versed in the lore of Midsummer Eve. How could she recognize him again?

He stuffed the sprig of rosemary into his pocket; at least he had that token of their meeting and could challenge her with it if need be.

His footsteps beat out the rhythm of the incantation, and presently the significance of the form of words the girl had used struck him with a force that brought him to an abrupt halt.

He that shall *wed* me,
Come follow me now!

It was stronger than the version old Sol had chanted. "He that shall *wed* me; he that shall *wed* me!" Had the girl been merely playing a game that she would laugh at on the morrow—and laugh at him also? Perhaps it was as well that she had not seen his face. Yet, there was the other possibility; the supersitition had made a bride of a milkmaid half-a-century ago; what power did it possess that night over the heart of a maid of higher degree? Jasper Barrow was so born and reared and constituted that he could not

laugh at this alternative. Reaching the church once more he leaned against the wall and tried to fix his own thoughts and emotions. Had he a throb of the heart for the phantom which had materialized into a beautiful breathing reality? Was he prepared to pay any claim the night might bring against him? He fingered the rosemary in his pocket. How was an answer possible!

He hurried over to the inn. Knowing that Watkin had bolted the street door he threaded a dark and littered passage by the side of the house and came into the yard. The lamp shone brightly through the kitchen window and he felt its welcome. The door was on the latch and yielded to the touch of his finger.

Another puzzle faced him. Sophie had laid her snowy cloth, her ale and cheese and chair for one! It was untouched; here the lover was a laggard, and a pretty maid was gone sad-hearted to bed. The petals of a red, red rose formed the letter "S" on the spotless linen. Why had the innkeeper's daughter chosen the "quality" emblem? Barrow began to wonder if he had understood Solomon aright. And who was Sophie's lover? And why was he proof against the spell? Had she slipped across the road to the church and then feared the ordeal?

Jasper sat down and tried to piece the possibilities together; tired as he was, he felt it would be useless to go to bed with his mind burdened with witchery and magical conundrums. After a struggle he accepted a solution which did not flatter his own pride. It was to the effect that he had plunged into the scheme of things in Swainswick without understanding either place or people and in ignorance of condition and tradition, with the result that he confessed himself an interloper and marplot. It must be set down to the credit of his humility—and fatigue—that he accepted the position.

Two maids—the lady of the house with the dormers and pretty Sophie Watkin of the "Yew Tree"—with lovers enshrined in their hearts had gone tremblingly forth at midnight to traffic with the unseen and the unknown in the world-old cause of love. And—Jasper doubted not—there had been two lovers, eager, hopeful, expectant, ensconced behind the shadowy yews. She of the house in the valley, with the greater daring born of better breeding, had braved her destiny with a promptitude that left shrinking little Sophie helpless until the full tale of the magic twelve was rung and her chance for the year was over. He—Jasper Barrow—like a blundering fool who

knew not at what point of the ancient rite the lover should "follow," had dashed into the drama and taken up a chase that belonged to another. He had eaten that other's supper, and was guilty with those who, not of the sacrifice, dared to lay sacrilegious hands on the sacrificial meats. The maid of the brown tresses and the Greek profile was not for him.

He stared again at the table. Poor little Sophie, robbed of the magic help of the incantation, had stolen sobbing home again. She had drawn up the blind, left the lamp fully alight, and traced that pathetic "S" in love's own flower as a garnish to love's feast. Perhaps she had sat waiting for her lover, praying that hope might nerve him to lift the latch and claim her. He had not come. So the lovelorn maiden had gone to bed, her beacon still burning, the door unbarred. Might it not be that the shy lad would peep through the window? If he did so, there was the sign that she had prepared for him. Surely then he would steal in, taste the ale and cheese, and rearrange the rose petals for his own initial. Sophie would rise with the sun to find his answer and her own happiness.

Jasper Barrow was not pleased with himself. He took the sprig of rosemary from his pocket

and tossed it upon the embers of the kitchen fire. Then he barred the door, reverently left the rose-letter untouched, blew out the light, and went to bed. His solution of the mystery was ingenious and he believed it. In the far-away villages and amongst the peasant folk superstition and the magical folk-lore tales were neither dead nor meaningless; they were not even things that one believed in secret and affected to ridicule in public. The Education Act and the School Board had not come along to educate Hodge and rob him of the simplicity of his forefathers. Sophie Watkin would believe with but few doubts to trouble her. The more highly-born maiden who had set the feast that Jasper had eaten played her part out of the bravado of high spirits and the yearning for adventure that plagues the strong in hours of loneliness. Yet she was of the hills and the old-time folk, and the thrill of her escapade had a subtle mingling of fear.

CHAPTER V

DAWN

THE world was awake once more, the sun on the Beacon, the dawn in the valley. Listless and heavy-lidded, Sophie Watkin came down to her kitchen; she who usually slept so soundly had tossed restlessly for the greater part of the night. At the foot of the staircase she paused whilst one might have counted "ten" slowly; then she opened the door that shut in the stairs and took the final step down. Her glance went swiftly to the table; the appeal of the rose-leaf "S" was unanswered, and the delicate petals lay shrivelling and browning on the cloth; the feast, likewise, was untouched. Sophie sighed; the night of mystery and romance was over, and the little world in which she moved was the same matter-of-fact, workaday place that it had been the morning before.

The maiden swept the rose petals into her hand and tossed them into the fire grate, where they

lay strewn over the half-burned sprig of rosemary; love tokens were mingling strangely in the ashes. Then she cleared the table, folding the cloth very neatly and smoothly and putting it aside for Sunday. Sophie was the practical little housewife once again, and threw open the back door to make the house free for the sweet air from the hills. Her glance travelled to the little gate that led from the side entry into the yard and garden. Two stunted elder bushes stood there, planted in older and more superstitious days to keep witches from the premises. A catch came into her breath. Here was explanation, and hope with it. The front door of the house had been locked, and the "charmed" lover could only enter through the elder portal; of course!—Sophie's heart insisted upon the "of course!"—of course, no magic could pass the old bushes, and the entering lover had been disenchanted. It was not that he had been heedless or uncaring; the "spell" was off him so that he neither saw nor understood. The fluttering little heart was lightened. But what a long, long journey to next Midsummer Eve! Much might happen; he might die, or go away, or even wed another; on the other hand he might do none of these things, and so the artless, trustful, superstitious maiden saw reason for hope—the hope

of the virgin heart in the bosom of sweet and twenty. A streak of the morning sunshine shot like a bar between the bushes; it was a favourable omen, and Sophie went and stood in the line of it and let its light play along the rippling coils of her hair.

A sound—a slight one—but the sound of a movement startled her, and she turned to see Jasper Barrow standing at the kitchen door. So unexpected was the apparition that her hand went quickly to her heart, her face paled and then flooded with crimson colour. How had he come there, and why? It was so early, far earlier than her usual hour for rising. The shock tied Sophie's tongue; moreover, she was in the morning disarray of the house worker, and for the moment she felt ashamed of it.

The sensations of Barrow were by no means simple, for he most certainly had not expected to see the pretty figure of Sophie standing as a plaything for the morning sunbeams. He broke the silence, but did it gently, almost reverently, speaking in a subdued voice. "I did not expect to find you downstairs"—he hesitated over the name—"Sophie."

"I always rise early, sir," she stammered.

"Not so early as this, surely; it is"—he glanced at his watch—"only half-past four!"

"But—but you, sir?"

Barrow laughed softly. "I am late," he replied. "I ought to have been on the Beacon to see the sun rise. I am going there now for a walk."

Such a matter-of-fact explanation of his appearance loosened Sophie's limbs. She hurried back to the kitchen. "You will have a cup of tea first, Mr. Barrow? I can kindle a fire of wood and boil the little kettle in a few minutes." She glanced towards the grate, and Jasper did the same, seeing the discarded rose petals. His hand came down gently on her soft shoulder. "So he didn't come, eh?" he asked.

Sophie trembled a little. "You saw it?" she asked, raising two dewy appealing eyes to his dark face.

"I did; he was a foolish fellow not to come."

"He came," whispered she.

"And ate of the feast?"

"No!"

"And would not take the love token?"

"He didn't understand."

"But he came?"

"Yes."

"Then he must have understood; only understanding could bring him here."

"He didn't understand enough!"

Poor little Sophie looked forlorn, her pretty face, in a way, disarrayed like her attire. Barrow was impulsive. His arm left her shoulder and lay gently about her, low on the waist. "Do you love him, Sophie?"

(Tremulously) "I doan't know."

"Does he love you?"

"I doan't know."

"Then why put the table for him?"

"I wanted to find out."

"Have you?"

"He couldn't tell me anything."

"But the rose-leaves would speak to him. What did you mean they should say?"

"They only meant a question."

"And that is unanswered, so that you know nothing after all. Is that why you threw them away?"

"Yes, but I was wrong. I know now."

"That he loves you?"

"No."

"That you love him?"

Sophie's head sank very low, and Mr. Barrow waited, still holding her in a light embrace that was a caress rather than a clasp. She did not answer his question. "Let me light the fire," she

murmured, and he released her without a word. Kneeling down on the hearth she stirred out the ashes, destroying the fragments of her timid love letter. The man watched her with his contemplative dark eyes. He noted every curve of the rounded girlish figure, the white of the bare arms and the firm slender neck; her hair was abundant and almost as dark as his own, but there was no sallowness in the complexion; the cheeks had the milk and roses bred of the pure upland air. He decided that she was something more than pretty; she was beautiful. The man who had a chance of so sweet a prize must be a fool to hesitate to take it.

The church clock struck "five." Sophie rose from her knees. Barrow roused from his reverie. "Where's the wood?" he asked.

"I'll get it," said Sophie hastily.

"No you won't; tell me where it is."

"In the shed."

Jasper went out and soon returned with an armful of chopped twigs and a wisp of straw.

He laid these in the grate, the girl protesting. "Fill the kettle," he exclaimed cheerily. "I can promise you a bonny fire."

"But you don't lay it our way, Mr. Barrow."

"No, I lay it my way; and I would wager myself

to get a fire when every housewife in Swainswick failed."

Sophie filled the kettle; she washed her hands, took out the Sunday cloth again and spread it upon the table. A minute later she was busy with bread and butter. It was the man's turn to protest. "Only a cup of tea, please," he said.

"You must eat something, sir; just a little. The air is keen on the Beacon, and you'll come back with a rare appetite for the real breakfast." The thin slices were piling on the plate. "Did you really want to see the sun rise?"

Barrow smiled. "I didn't think of such a thing when I went to bed."

"No?" Sophie paused and looked up

"I didn't sleep. I don't like beds within four walls. When the nights are dry, give me the open sky, and just a tent against the rain and the snow."

"Like a"—Sophie paused—"a gipsy!"

"Exactly."

"I should like it, too."

Barrow looked keenly at her. "That life kills the white maidens," he answered, gravely; "for you the roof and the hearth-fire are necessary."

Sophie stood dreaming into the fire waiting for the kettle to boil. Barrow's words, spoken quickly and emphatically, seemed full of meaning. His

mother had been a white maiden, and her story was one romance of the hills. Had the wandering life killed her? Love and a life in the open found something else besides sunshine; there would be wind and storm, and bitter cold; the roof tree shut out the moon and the stars, but it also hid the frown of the black clouds. Sophie sighed; the man smiled indulgently, for the maid was pretty and born for romance.

The kettle boiled and the two sat down to a first little breakfast in the silence of a world that was still largely asleep, and of that simple rustic world they chatted until Sophie got up from the table.

Barrow got up also. The brief fire of wood had died down to a few grey ashes. "I must get you some more sticks," he said.

"No," she cried, and walked to the door. He followed.

"We will get them together. I am also skilled as a stick gatherer." Again he got the direct challenging look from the brown eyes. "You are a strange man, Mr. Barrow. I don't understand you."

"I don't understand myself," he answered.

They entered the woodshed. Jasper chopped the sticks and Sophie gathered them into a bundle. The clock chimed the half-hour. "You are wast-

ing the morning," she whispered. He stood up. "I am going now." Together they came out into the open yard. The big body of Adam Stone was leaning over the gate between the elder bushes. The sun was on him, but other fires were in his eyes. Jasper's instincts were as quick as those of a wild animal; he saw an enemy, and a flash from his own eyes returned the threat in Adam's. Politely raising his cap to Sophie he strode to the gate. Adam opened it and stood aside for the other to pass through. He watched him down the entry until he vanished round the corner of the house. Then he walked into the yard and faced Sophie; moody, corroding love stared down upon maidenly pride and defiance.

"Be your father up?" he asked.

"No," said the girl.

"What right has *he* to be up with 'ee then?"

The school-taught precision and accuracy went out of Sophie's speech. "Who be you to say so?" she answered.

Adam came a swift step nearer, seized her arms, and shook the wood out of them. "Why did 'ee never ax me to do this man's-job for 'ee?" he cried.

"Let me go," she answered, struggling to free herself from his grip.

"I'll not let thee go. How long have you two been together?"

Sophie's reply was another struggle to release herself. Adam stooped his face to hers, "Answer me! Answer me!"

"You are a coward!"

A harsh laugh burst from the big throat. "A coward! I be a coward, be I! I'd fight a thousand such as he single-handed." He shook her in his passion. Through the open door he saw the breakfast table, the two cups, the two chairs, and the sight shocked the first spasm of fury out of him; he flung her hands away. "So soon, so soon!" he muttered. Sophie stooped to pick up the sticks. "Let 'em be!" he ordered, and there was that in his voice that made her obey him.

In a minute he turned to her again, and his voice was steadier. "You'll answer my questions, and you'll tell the truth. Marnen' after marnen' have I come round here to watch your window. Have 'ee ever seen me?"

"No."

"Nor have I seen you, for 'tis before your risin' time. You've been up a hower, and so have he. How could that be unless 'twas a bargain over night?"

"There was no bargain!"

"Not in words, but you have eyes; so have he, devil's eyes; 'twas agreed!"

"You are a coward, Adam Stone!"

"I've answered that," he said. "I'll answer it again—to him. What have he said to 'ee? Answer me!"

"There is nothing to answer."

Adam came nearer again. "Is it that ye daren't answer, that shame won't let 'ee? His sort be quick at kissin'. Dare you tell the neighbours that you were up when they were abed, up alone with a stranger sleepin' one night under your roof? Would they think no harm?"

"Let 'em think!" cried Sophie passionately. "As for you, I hate you!"

"But I do not hate you. I love you! I love your pretty face, your dainty body. I would worship 'em; he would play with it all. Do you hear? play with it! 'Tis in his face, his eyes. You tempt him. Why did you do it, my dear?"

The question came from the big man with a pathetic intonation, and his toil-worn hands stretched out in appeal. Sophie burst into tears and ran into the house. Adam made a step as though to follow her, turned sharply, and hastened away. A cloud, the first for weeks, came over the sun.

CHAPTER VI

THE ROSEMARY GIRL

THE house where Barrow had eaten the charm supper was known simply as "Miss Trotter's." Any other name that it might have had once upon a time was forgotten, and "goin' down to Miss Trotter's" had been a current phrase in Swainswick for nearly two generations. The old lady herself was a person of considerable means, much independence, and more eccentricity. In the free, spacious hill-country folks grow up with all their corners upon them; there is little of that rubbing with the rest of the world that produces smoothness and uniformity. Miss Trotter was petite, vivacious, outspoken, rotund and pleasing in appearance, but singularly angular in behaviour.

She was an open-handed benefactress to the many, but a source of perpetual irritation to the few who stood for convention in church, and state, and parish. Standing as the champion of freedom in thought and conduct, she was constantly fight-

ing little battles, rejoicing in the war of words and wits.

The girl whom Jasper had followed from the churchyard was Julia Carden, her niece. At the time of her midnight escapade she was twenty-five years of age, rather tall and full bodied, with fine features and lively colouring. The girl's chief glory was her abundant nut-brown hair, ample coiled tresses that were one shade where the sun touched them, and another and a darker hue in the hollows of the thick waves. Jasper Barrow had failed to see her eyes; they were a blue-grey, full and bright under long, dark lashes. Sophie Watkin was pretty—charming after the model of a Dresden shepherdess; Julia Carden was queenly.

To be a spinster at five and twenty was not usual with the warm-blooded maidens of the hills. Miss Trotter was eccentric, and combative with her own class, so her niece, despite her undeniable beauty, had had few opportunities for love making and no real touch of the grand passion. But she was ripe for it. Swainswick had looked upon her as marriageable for eight or nine years and would have said "over-ripe," for the village wenches were not wont to tarry long or spurn eligible swains.

Jane Gosling, a motherly, comfortable old body

and the spouse of Solomon, was down to Miss Trotter's and seated in secret conclave with the niece. They sat in a cool corner of the dining-room by the open window that looked on to the orchard. Not many hours had elapsed since Mr. Jasper Barrow had eaten his silent supper of enchantment in the same room. The old woman was the instigator of the midnight adventure and she was come down to learn all that had happened. Julia Carden had told the story.

"And ther's folks as 'll tell 'ee these things be nothin' but foolishness," said Jane. "I'd like to tell 'em of last night."

"But you mustn't," protested the girl.

"Of course not, but 'tis vexin' all the same. Wise men and wise women have always believed that the moon-world and the sun-world, though they do look much the same, be as different as night and day. I tell 'ee the moon can change the very nature and juice of the flowers at times. Ther' was an old woman lived hereabouts when I was a girl as knew the moon-season for everything, but pa'son had her ducked, and that turned her stubborn so that her died without telling a soul the secret."

"Well, things certainly happened last night." Julia laughed. "I was nearly scared to death.

Now I am in my sober senses I cannot imagine how I dared to leave the door open."

"Fate, my dear," said Jane. "Of course, I knowed 'twas Solomon running after I."

"And I don't know who ate my supper even now!"

"Pity ye didn't have a peep at his face. But ther', that will come; he's your man, and you'll see 'un soon enough." Jane smoothed down her dress with an air of finality. She had spoken.

The girl lay back in the low chair, a picture of youth and grace and beauty, abounding in vitality and sensuously alive and vibrant. "I shall not know him unless he is pleasing; and I shall know him for just so long as the whim holds me," said she.

"You can't toss 'un aside like that!" cried Jane. "He's fated to 'ee, willed to 'ee."

"Then I shall will him away again. Why, you dear old soul, I don't want him."

"You do think so, miss; wait a bit."

"He may not want me."

"He comed after 'ee. You see, I never really wanted Solomon; 'twas Joe Blake my mind was set on; but when the man came and ate my supper I took 'un and said no more about it. I had gone to the church for 'un, and to church I'd go with 'un."

"Well, Fate treated you kindly, for she gave you the better man of the two."

Jane sighed very thoughtfully. "Marriage," she said, "be a thing as folks knows nought about until they tries it; and then 'tis too late to learn. Now I bain't sayin' as Solomon be a poor husband or a bad 'un; he's better than most, and a child could manage 'un. He'd never rule a woman, would Solomon, and that's a cruel weakness to a wife like me. Now with Joe 'tis different. Folks doan't stick at callin' he bad names. His temper's as black as his hair was when I set eyes on him first. Words doan't count much with 'un; 'tis a blow as like as not; but when the soft fits be on him he can love like a burnin' fire. That's Joe; curse your eyes one minute, but kiss 'em and call 'em lovely in the next breath. Poor Polly Blake can't manage her man, and 'tis that have spoiled 'un. I would have been livelier living with Joe!"

Julia Carden smiled at these sighings after storms on the part of the old woman. Life with Solomon had proved unexciting; a bed and table partnership with his old rival might have ended in disaster, for Jane had always been a plump, strong-natured woman with a will of her own. "My visitor was a dark man," said the girl.

Jane sat up sharply. "Do 'ee mean it?" she asked eagerly.

"I saw his hands; they were beautifully kept and looked almost as soft as my own; but they were many shades darker. When he knelt for a moment by me he almost laid them in my lap. I should know his hands again out of a thousand pairs."

"I count he was a gentleman," said Jane.

"He wore town-made boots, soft grey leggings, and had ridden on horseback that day."

"And was at Swainswick Church at midnight!"

Jane sat musing. "Must be stayin' in the village," she said; then exploded with a "Dang my silly wits! 'twas the new maister of Sheepdene!"

Miss Carden sat up sharply this time. "Is the new man there?"

"That a' be!" replied Mrs. Gosling. "Solomon went to see 'un yesterday afternoon, and Jim Watkin brought my man home last night after closing time—his head and legs muzzy wi' ale. 'You've been drinkin', Solomon Gosling,' I says to 'un.

"'My dear,' he says, 'I have.'

"'Ay,' says I, 'spendin' they few shill'uns. 'Twill be easy come, easy go, with 'ee now, I reckon.'

"'The shill'uns be all right!' he says, and slaps his pocket.

"'Who've been treatin' 'ee, then?' says I, and pretty sharp, too. He steadied hisself by the chair and says, 'The divvle! 'Tis Midsummer Eve. Come to see I in memory of fifty years agone. Hopes you be well, Mrs. Gosling!'

"'I be well enough to find better company for 'ee than that in future,' says I, and I put 'un into his chair and gave 'un the length of my tongue till he fell asleep. Then I left 'un, for I'll have no tipsy man in my bed. This morning I took 'un to task again and found he'd been drinkin' with this Mr. Jasper Barrow."

"Is that his name?" asked Julia.

"Ay, and I wanted to know why he should call the young gentleman 'the divvle.'"

"I want to know that too. What did Solomon say?" Miss Carden leaned forward.

"Why, that a' was dark enough for Old Harry and had eyes like black coals."

"I felt my visitor's eyes burn into me," said Julia. "But why should he run after me?"

Mrs. Gosling had a vision of Solomon winking beerily upon her. "You know how my man was," she said hesitatingly.

"Mine was a gentleman, young and a bit

wild, but perfectly courteous," said Julia a little sharply.

"Then the spell drawed 'un!" exclaimed Mrs. Gosling.

"How should he know anything about it?"

"The man never knows; 'tis against the nature of a charm that a' should. You've drawed your man and must marry him or nobody."

"But I was only in fun."

"That makes no difference. He'll come to claim 'ee."

"No, he is a gentleman."

"He broke your bread, and you took the rosemary leaf. He've got the sprig, and the leaf will draw 'ee to it."

"I shall burn the leaf."

"Then he will come and sit by the fire."

Julia Carden sighed. "You talk like a witch, Jane. I am half afraid of you."

"'Tis the man you must fear, my dear."

"I am beginning to do so, already; you make me think of his eyes, those eyes that I never saw. I shall dream of them!" Julia shook herself as though to throw off a spell. "I wish I had never gone to the churchyard; it was silly, wicked."

"Tchut!" cried the old woman; "ther's wholesome spells and wicked spells. I never knowed

harm come of this one, if the couple marry. In your heart he may not be the man for 'ee, but you'll live together snug enough and better than most do. You see the spell be there, tying 'ee together, so to speak. I have always felt it wi' Solomon and it have kept I from naggin' at 'un too much. He's mine; I drawed 'un—and ther' 'tis!"

But this simple fatalism of three-score years and ten did not appeal to the robust womanhood of the young girl, who was now keenly conscious of the passionate hopes and longings that were stirring strongly in her heart. She stood up. "I shall marry the man I want," she cried, fierce defiance of any intermeddling Fate ringing in her full voice. "I will so love him, so desire him, so yearn for him that the true spell will be upon him and he will come to me!"

The old woman gazed with a sort of worship at the beautiful face and form silhouetted against the summer window.

"My dear," she said, "you be handsome enough and temptin' enough to put a spell upon any man, but ther's one man that can put the spell upon you. What will be must be, and that's gospel, whether folks believe it or not. I know, for I have lived, my dear, and you be only just beginnin'

life. Fate be the master of us all, whether we be rich or poor, plain or pretty; 'tis all one! Dreams be one thing, life be another, I can tell 'ee. 'Tis best not to go a-dreamin'!"

"What have I to do in this place but dream—dream—dream!" cried the girl passionately. "And do you think I have never dreamed of a lover coming over the hills?"

"'Twas from the hilltop he came."

"By night, by night, and I never saw him. Mine must come with the sun upon him and the trees bowing a welcome."

"He will come like that next time." Mrs. Gosling rose up. "I must be getting along up home now. Mark my words, my dear, your lover be come." Julia laughed and walked with the old woman to the door. What had she, with youth and health and beauty, to do with superstition!

Yet the lover was really come, and would declare himself, but not until the heart of the maid had ached and rebelled because of the smiles he had for others.

CHAPTER VII

LINKS IN A LONG CHAIN

JASPER BARROW walked to the Beacon and so enjoyed the magnificent sweeping view from the summit that he was tempted to go farther afield and swung off in the direction of Pottersham Woods. For a while the vision of Adam Stone went with him. He guessed that the fellow was Sophie's lover, and would have approved her choice had he found a smile on the strong features of the stonemason. Doubtless it was for him that the midnight supper had been laid. The rose was now amongst the ashes; the lover had lost ground, and Sophie, with a maiden's waywardness, would do battle with him ere he regained it. Jasper remembered the flash of jealousy in Adam's eyes, but the recollection only brought a smile to his own lips. Sophie's grace and prettiness were a challenge to all men with warm blood in their veins, and he for one was going to pay them the homage that was their due. The lover who asked

for perfect beauty in his mistress must not expect also quietude of mind. He must pay the price for obtaining that which so many men desire. Probably the big stonemason was not philosopher enough to recognize this; well, he must learn his lesson.

Jasper dismissed Adam from his mind and gave his attention to the panorama of hill and valley that stretched on all sides about him. He was in his mother's country and he wanted to know it as she had known it, to see it as her dying eyes had envisioned it when she babbled to him of its warmth and beauty, its picturesque villages, its sleepy hollows, and the simple warm-hearted folk, the burr of whose musical English had been on her lips with her last breath. The tie of affection between mother and son had been of extraordinary strength; it proved strong enough to enable him to resist the call of the blood of the nomad, to renounce the "kingship" of his father's tribe, to endure the discipline of Gorgio schools, and to equip himself with some of the graces of an English gentleman.

Jasper came down through the Pottersham Woods to the tiny village in the narrow combe below them. The road went steeply down to the nestling houses, hardly any two of which were

built on the same level, then turned and rose as steeply against the farther face of the hill. The stone-built cottages, cleaned by the upland winds and rains, were dumped in the green hollows, perched on spurs of the hillside, or thrust back into the fringe of the encircling trees, their trim gardens lying around at all angles, gay with country flowers, redolent of sun-warmed herbs and green with the cottagers' crops that never went one day untended. Smoke trailed up straight and blue against the waving green of the trees, bird and bee and butterfly flitted everywhere in a crossing, dipping, rising medley of motion. A dog barked joyously, the morning voices of wide-awake children rose sharply in the clear air, mingling with the call of a brook that tumbled full and noisy from unfailing springs that laughed at the drought. It was an Eden hidden away in a pocket of the hills. Dotted about in the winding valleys were other hamlets as homely and peaceful as Pottersham; but each stood alone, stretches of upland road, green-faced hill, or shadowy woodland separating one from the other. The dark stranger chatted for a while to a brown-stained maker of pots and pans, then climbed to the highway and set his face towards Swainswick.

It was eight o'clock when Jasper got back to the

"Yew Tree." He found his breakfast laid in a little private parlour that looked out on to the road. Watkin himself brought in the juicy rashers of "home cured" and the fried eggs that Sophie had prepared with a care and skill that she had not bestowed upon a meal for many a day. The bread, too, was of her own baking, and the butter glistened as though the dew lay upon it. The guest was hungry and would have liked to pay his hostess the compliment of a word of thanks for her savoury dish. But Sophie did not appear.

She had had a morning of acute wretchedness, and as much of it as she could spare from her household duties had been spent lying face downwards upon her bed in a tempest of sobbing. Adam's words had wounded her sensitive spirit like lance thrusts. The girl was as pure hearted and guileless as she had been as a child of seven, but she understood the hoydenism—even shame—with which he had charged her. She felt that his cruel speeches soiled her so much that she would never feel the same innocent girl again; mud had been thrown at her, and the stains were left. She was shamed in a man's eyes and her body shivered. Adam had rashly hoped that she might hate him; the hate had come bitter and accusing. He had robbed her of a priceless jewel—perfect

purity of thought; he had destroyed her ease of mind whether in his presence or that of Jasper Barrow; and the romantic little maid was already half in love with the dark master of Sheepdene. She could still feel the caress of his touch upon her shoulder, the gentle pressure of his arm about her waist. It had meant nothing more to him than the desire of youth to be in sense contact with the beauty of maidenhood; but something warmer within her had responded to the touch. She lay, thrilled with flushes of heat and chilled by waves of cold, sobbing over the degrading knowledge of the heart of a man that had come to her. She had eaten of the tree that morning, and the taste of the fruit was unspeakably bitter. It was impossible, so she said, for her to look upon the face of Jasper Barrow again that day.

Barrow's immediate business that morning was to find some capable woman and a maid or two to put Sheepdene House in order. His experience of Sophie's housewifery prompted him to turn to her for advice and guidance. He strolled through the house and into the garden looking for her, but she was listening for his footsteps and fled from his approach. He chatted with Watkin, and the latter, after reviewing the Swainswick women in detail, gave it as his opinion that he could

not do better than go to Jane Gosling. "She's strong and sprack, and better'n most women twenty years younger," he said; "and she belongs to Sheepdene House, knows every stone in it; one of the family, as you might say."

Barrow looked dubious, remembering Sol. "Try her for a bit," suggested Watkin; "she'll serve 'ee faithful, is a clean and decent body to look upon, and have the sort of tongue that'll kip half-a-dozen wenches in order. It will give 'ee time to look round."

"Yes?"

"And you might go in a hurry farther afield than Swainswick and fare worse, sir."

"True; perhaps I had better see Mrs. Gosling. I should have liked your daughter's opinion."

"She'd agree!" answered Watkin emphatically.

So Jasper went down to Solomon's cottage. Jane was not in. At that particular moment she was discussing charms and a dark stranger with the maid of the love chase. Going again in the afternoon he found the old dame with polished face and spotless apron waiting to receive him; the neighbours had told her of his call, so the kettle was singing on the hob in the little back kitchen in order that the owner of the cottage and the hereditary master and lord of its inmates might

PROPERTY
OF THE
NEW YORK
SOCIETY LIBRARY

be offered the hospitality and pledge of a cup of tea. Solomon was at home but banished to the garden behind the house, where he was out of sight and hearing. His wife had told him that she wanted none of his "clack" and would "size-up young maister," according to her ideas of the weighing and measuring of a man. Sol knew from past experience that their standards of comparison differed widely. He had his own opinion, and over a contemplative pipe beneath the apple-tree he arranged and formulated his judgment so that he might be ready to do battle with his better-half if necessity arose.

Having seated her visitor in Solomon's arm-chair, Jane betook herself to the other side of the hearth and the old rocker, which, to her lasting grief and disappointment, had never soothed a baby. She adjusted her spectacles, smoothed her thinning white hair, and gazed upon the successor to the long line of Merretts of Sheepdene. Jasper looked upon the old dame with interest, for she had known his mother from babyhood, had probably nursed her, and could tell him more about her than any other living being; she was a link in his life, and his heart went out to the motherly old soul more than he would have cared, just then, to acknowledge to her. His voice was quite soft

when he spoke. "Mrs. Gosling," said he, "I understand that you are one of us at Sheepdene. I am come to take up my little heritage and lead a life to which I am a stranger."

"That's true," said Jane.

"I want help; will you give it to me?"

"To the last drop of blood in my body," was the fervent answer. Jasper stretched out his hand and Jane took it. The bond of service was sealed. The call of fealty had been given and answered and not a single question asked. It was the old, faithful, rustic way, and three-score years and ten were bound to five and twenty summers in an unbreakable bond of devotion. In looks and in bearing the dark stranger was the antithesis of the Merretts. Jane's old eyes, however, could see a likeness, and her slow pulses responded to the call of the blood. He was no "cuckoo" usurping the old nest, but a true bird, although his plumage was darkened.

Jane rose up. "Now let I put 'ee a cup o' tea, maister, and then we can talk more homely like. I've some of the old chaney from Sheepdene and we'll drink out on't."

Jasper expressed his thanks and pleasure, and the old dame bustled around and soon had the tea and some wholesome home-made cake upon

the table. She had wiped away more than one furtive tear in the seclusion of the back kitchen. The simple old heart was thrilled to think she was not laid by useless on the shelf after all; best of all the call to service had come from the young. Concerning her visitor many thoughts had come into her mind, prompted by Solomon's overdose of ale and Julia Carden's story of the previous night. These she now banished like outlaws, for they were false to the soft glances of the black eyes, traitors to a voice that was low and musical, and stood condemned by the pressure of friendship from strong, warm fingers. Jane Gosling was a motherly woman whose heart had never been filled by children; she was bond-slave to tradition, and she loved a dark man. Thus it was that she took a stranger to her bosom.

Jasper told the story of his need. Jane forestalled his request by an eager offer. "Now look 'ee, maister," she cried, "'tis no good beatin' about in Swainswick for the sort of woman ye want. They as'd suit 'ee bain't to be had in a minute. Hirings and engagin's hereabouts do date from Barton Fair and Mop at Peterminster, and ther's three months to run afore fair time and plenty to choose from. 'Tis my duty, look 'ee, and maybe 'tis my right to come back to the old

place. Never mind the colour of my hair. I be well and strong and no older than my heart, and that's young since ye comed in and warmed it. I can manage for 'ee for a bit, and though my husband be full the age of his years he can tell folks and show folks what he can't do himself. He knows every beast on the farm, their humours and their whimsies, and he can tell 'ee what each bit of ground be good for. We'll both come back!"

Jasper Barrow had tact when passion was no guiding finger to his actions. He accepted Jane's offer as a spontaneous tribute to himself and what he stood for in her eyes, giving no hint that he had come to propose the same thing as a last solution to his difficulties. He knew gipsy fealty and had experienced some measure of it; he was able to treat peasant devotion in the right spirit. "But how about maids?" he asked.

"I can find 'ee one at once," replied Jane. "She shall come over wi' I and Solomon tomorrow marnen."

Jasper Barrow went away well satisfied with his afternoon's work, and not a little flattered at the old woman's homage. Solomon heard the click of the gate latch, so left his exile beneath the apple-tree and came into the kitchen. He glanced at the teacups and then at his wife. Fifty years

of close wedlock, unbroken even for the space of a day and a night, had woven its psychical bond between man and wife. Solomon detected a subtle jarring; Jane was changed somehow. He scratched his bare scalp with a thoughtful finger. "What do 'ee think on him?" he asked.

"He made ye out to be a prapper fule, Solomon Gosling."

"Me!" ejaculated Solomon, and he advanced his old legs a threatening step. "What did a' say about I?"

"Nothin'; 'twas what you said about he. You be a prapper discernin' man on an ale bench, bain't 'ee! Size folks up to a hair ye do. I'd be sorry for the dog ye sat in judgment on."

Solomon retreated again. "A woman's judgment of a man be always lop-sided. I reckon ye didn't even notice that Old Harry had been at his christ'nin' and left a smudge behind!" The sarcasm failed to ruffle Jane. She answered quite placidly. "If I'd had the painting of the young gentleman's skin I wouldn't have made it a shade whiter."

"Reckon ye'll be sayin' as he's true Merrett afore long!"

"So a' be! Good old blood like that bain't sp'iled because a drop of another sort be mixed

wi' it. T'other sort be quality too if fine limbs show fine breedin'."

"Ay, ay!" muttered Sol.

"And I be goin' back to service at Sheepdene."

Solomon stared, then grinned. "I'll buy 'ee a fairin' ribbon, my dear, when Michaelmas comes along and the hirin'."

"I bain't waitin' for no fair time; tomorrow is my day. I be goin' to housekip for the young maister." Jane almost shouted the last sentence, and her astonished husband dropped into the nearest chair.

"Housekip!"

"Ay, housekip. What's more, you be goin', too."

"To work?"

"Ay, to work; so you can pack up my box and your own ready for the cart tomorrow marnen." Solomon was staggered. Was this a sentence of banishment from Swainswick, the "Yew Tree," and his position of moneyed independence? He leaned forward and banged his fist on the table under Jane's nose until the cups rattled in the saucers. "I won't go!" he shouted; "they seven shill'uns was willed to I accordin' to law, and I won't work for 'em."

"Ye'll work for nothin', my man," was Jane's rejoinder.

"And how much be you to work for?" demanded Sol.

"For nothin'; I didn't ax 'un for no money."

"And I be to go trapesin' at his heels along they beggarin' fields—for nothin'!"

"If the maister is minded to tell 'ee to do so."

"I'll see 'un dammed fust," cried Sol; "that's what I'll do—see 'un dammed fust!"

Jane rose up. "I be goin' along to Ellen Cobb; she's comin' wi' us. Get they boxes out of the garret."

"Is she takin' on service for nothin'?"

"We belong to the family." Jane disappeared upstairs for her bonnet and the Paisley shawl that was sacred to the highest occasions only. Her husband disappeared also, noiselessly and stealthily up-street to the "Yew Tree." At the gate he paused for a moment. "If I go, there must be a bargain o' money on it. Work for nothin' when I be a lawful pensioned man and as free as a lord! Why everybody 'ud laugh at me! I should laugh at myself, dammed if I shouldn't!" He struggled up the slope and stopped again. "And for fifty years that dratted woman ha' nagged I for havin' no head for money! And now"—Sol gasped for breath—"Well, 'tis past human sense to guess what a woman'll do

when she's touched by a man; and the older she be, the bigger fule!" He trudged on, bubbling with indignation.

About an hour after his call upon Mrs. Gosling, Jasper Barrow rode away for home. The previous evening the thought of sleeping alone in the old house with the ghosts of ten generations of unknown ancestors had been repellent to him; now it attracted him just as strongly. He had sent over provisions for his larder and looked forward to gipsying for himself under the grey roof of Sheepdene.

Julia Carden had sat at home wondering whether her midnight guest would have the romance or the audacity to come and claim his rosemary leaf. He had made no sign, so, piqued yet relieved, she put on her bonnet and went up to Swainswick with the half-formed intention of calling upon Jane Gosling for another chat on the mysteries of midsummer magic. Just as she turned into the main street she espied the grey leggings (that were almost the personality to her of her should-be lover) astride a spirited black horse. Her first impulse was to dodge back into the little street from which she had just emerged, but she conquered the inclination to run away and went on. Sophie Watkin stepped out of a shop and passed

along in the same direction a few yards ahead of her.

Barrow came towards them at a walking pace and Julia stole a look at him. The darkness of man and horse startled her almost into an expression of astonishment, but her next swift thought was that the picture they made was handsome and not sinister; it was striking enough to attract attention even from the indifferent. Her pulses quickened and her steps with them, and she felt the colour mounting to her cheeks. He had been bold enough by night; why had his daring failed him in the day? The next instant she was aware that his glance was upon her side of the street. The moment was critical. What would happen?

The man's hat came off with a graceful sweep of his arm. The girl in front gave a quick bow, and Julia looked up to find the horseman's gaze full upon Sophie Watkin, but utterly oblivious of her own presence! There was a smile in his eyes and on his lips as he rode by. Sophie turned and looked after him, her pretty face rosily red, and in her beautiful brown eyes was a soft light like that in the eyes of a tame fawn. Julia hurried by; Sophie did not see her. A flush of jealousy heated her whole body. The man had eaten her supper, pledged her in wine, given her the love

token of a rosemary leaf—the herb of marriage. Yet he had passed her by and bestowed his smiles upon the blushing daughter of an innkeeper, and Sophie had shown unmistakably that already something had happened that could stir her heart at the sight of Jasper Barrow. What had happened? Julia went down to the Goslings' cottage; the lover that was to be had ridden by unheeding.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAN

JASPER BARROW was at home and alone in the spacious dining parlour of Sheepdene House. The white embers of a fire smouldered in the wide grate. He had kindled a faggot of wood and spitted a chicken across the glowing mass in true gipsy fashion, but he had washed down his supper with old wine instead of water from a wayside brook. He stood by one of the high stone-mullioned windows that looked out upon the lawn that was clothed in tall ripe grasses sadly needing the scythe. The valley lay below him, with its fields and winding paths, and its stretches of wood and splashes of copse. Beyond, the land swept upwards again to the towering height of the treeless ridge of the Beacon.

Twilight had come, and with it a dense canopy of cloud, driven in by a south-west wind and heralding the rain. Already the thunder was crashing and rolling along the hills, and vivid

flashes of forked lightning were darting athwart the Beacon, bringing into white relief the houses of Swainswick, picking out field from wood and silhouetting the grazing cattle. It was going to be a wild night, with none of the stillness and softness of moonlight that had beautified the Midsummer Eve and allowed maidens to play at love games in the churchyard.

Jasper's was a tempestuous soul that loved the storm, and he stood watching the play of nature's gigantic artillery until darkness had come, and with it the loud hiss of the sheeted rain. His thoughts darted hither and thither like the lightning. He was on a wide heath with the wind buffeting his boyish face and the cold rain streaming down his lank hair; he sat in the smoky tent amidst a group of tawny-hued women and girls, weaving baskets and splitting pegs; now he was stealing like a fox through a patch of undergrowth, his father within touch of him, and both intent upon the thrilling game of poaching; he was seated beside his mother—still a handsome woman—on the roots of a spreading beech and listening to her passionate outpourings as she spoke to him of her Gorgio people, of their kindness, uprightness, honesty, cleanliness of body and soul, and he saw himself a pathetic, unwashed figure,

kneeling to pray prayers that the tribe did not know, and after the praying to a tremendous God that dwelt above him, taking an oath in the name of that awful Deity that he would forswear his father and the tents of vagabondage and revert to the house-ways of his mother's people. He was a wild lad at school, clothed like his fellows, eager for knowledge, yet so unlike them that they held aloof from him or taunted him because of the colour of his skin and his devil's eyes. Over again he fought many a fierce boyish battle, felt the sting of blows and thrilled with exultation at the remembered feel of his hard hand upon the soft flesh of an adversary. His glance went out to pierce the darkness and see the church on the hill before him. He was kneeling at the feet of a beautiful girl and offering her a rosemary leaf. He remembered that he had never asked her name or inquired one word about her. He saw Sophie's rose letter on the white cloth, looked into her brown eyes, put his arm about her dainty waist. Adam Stone glared at him, and he felt his muscles grow tense at the challenge. He sighed and looked behind him into the darkness of the room. Already he had too many ghosts for company. And the thunder rolled like huge balls along the roof; the lightning opened the valley with reveal-

ing flashes; the rain swished in a torrent against the window.

Striking a match he went to his hamper of groceries and found a bundle of candles. On the ancient buffet stood a pair of ornate, three-branched candlesticks. He filled them and put them on the long central table, lighting them one by one. As point of flame was added to flame, a hundred markings of glass and pot and flagon came into a sort of still life on the surface of the table; darkness retreated to the farthest corners and yellow reflections appeared on the dark panelling of the walls. A loud knocking came upon the outer door, starting the echoes everywhere. Jasper recollected that the door was unbolted. Some of his men dwelt in cottages near by. Probably something had happened in the storm and they wanted him. He took up a candlestick and went from the room.

On opening the door Jasper found himself face to face with a man whose generous physical proportions made his own appear almost insignificant. The stranger topped him by a good five inches and was rather more than proportionately broad; a heavy cloak, with a cape of many folds, bulked him still more. The light of the candles shone into a big face that was as highly coloured

and double-chinned as that of the proverbial alderman; but the face was genial and good-humoured, and the eyes blue and sleepy-looking. He greeted Jasper with a nod before speaking. The voice, when it came, was typical of the man, full, fat sounding, and resonant.

"You are Mr. Barrow, I take it?"

"I am," replied Jasper.

"Well, my name is Beech—Matthew Beech. I am your nearest neighbour. Saw your lights pop up in the darkness and so reckoned you'd be in and perhaps glad of a bit of company."

Jasper stood aside. "Come in," he said.

"Devil of a night, but a lovely rain; it is a sin to be out o' doors and keeping a single drop of it off the thirsty earth." Beech removed hat and cloak whilst talking. He stood six feet four, in brown corduroy, skirted coat with ample pockets, waistcoat and breeches; jack boots reached to his knees. He sniffed the remains of the savoury roast. "Hope I'm not disturbing you at supper, Mr. Barrow."

Jasper smiled. "No, I was indulging in after-supper dreams; but there's a bottle of wine on the table if you will join me."

Beech rubbed his fat, dimpling hands and walked into the dining parlour. "I'll join you

with pleasure, Mr. Barrow," he answered, and deposited his huge bulk in a chair. Jasper passed him glass and bottle. The visitor looked up. "So you dream," he said, and then added, "You look a dreamer. Well, hilltops are fine dreaming places. I know!"

Jasper glanced at his guest and thought he had never seen anything human that was less likely to dream. He filled his own glass. "Glad to see you, Mr. Beech," he said, and sipped the wine. "Glad to see you, sir, and here's good luck!" Beech emptied his glass and put it down. Jasper pushed along his tobacco box. "You smoke, I expect!"

"As badly as the worst chimney in my house!" Beech filled his pipe. For about twenty puffs each man sat silent, listening to the storm and noting that the thunder was gone northward over Peterminster. Jasper broke the silence by remarking that the rain was as heavy as ever. Beech nodded. Jasper, as host, was beginning to wonder whether the pipe and the wine bottle wouldn't interest his guest more deeply than any conversation, when the big man took up the talking.

"I haven't been inside this place since—since before you were born. How long ago was that?"

"Close upon twenty-six years."

"So long as that! Well, time flies. The place seems as familiar as though 'twas only yesterday since I sat here with your grandfather. You never knew him, of course?"

"Never."

"Nor your aunt?"

"I never saw any of my mother's people."

"You missed some queerish types of humanity. You don't mind my saying so?"

"Not in the least; I am interested."

"Well, your aunt—the late lamented—was a wonder in her way; the best farmer along these hills. Do you know much of farming?"

"Nothing, but I have noticed that no fields are better tilled than mine."

"And none worse than mine. Had Miss Merrett lived she and I would have been at law with one another. For years she threatened me with action for damages for spoiling her crops."

"Oh!"

"You see, Mr. Barrow,—or you will see when you walk abroad,—that my fields are damnably tilled. I just scratch enough soil to get a living and leave the rest to Providence. I have discovered that Providence unassisted is a prolific breeder of weeds. And weeds will seed and propagate their kind in the most generous way; and they don't observe

landmarks; hedges, ditches, and walls don't shut them in. Hence the justifiable wrath of your aunt and the threats of the law. 'Why don't I farm properly?'"

Jasper smiled. "I was just going to ask that question."

"Well, the answer is a story. You shall have it some day. At present I prefer to talk about you."

Beech's eye glinted towards the bottle, so Jasper passed it and waited. His guest sat ruminating for a minute or two, then faced him suddenly. "Do you know, Mr. Barrow, that I was pretty near to being your father?"

The rumble of the thunder was lost in this astonishing declaration. "You knew my mother!"

Beech waved a ponderous arm. "My dear boy, she was my sweetheart all those long years ago; I never was hers. She preferred a handsome gentleman of title, one addicted to wandering habits; but of course you know that story?"

"Yes, leave it alone, please."

Beech drummed his big fingers on the table. "You will quite understand, Mr. Barrow, that I don't wish to pry into your business, but having said what I have about old days you won't be surprised that I should like to know something of Barbara Merrett's story?"

"Not at all; but I can't talk about it."

"Not tonight; this is our first meeting."

"Never!" exclaimed Jasper emphatically.

Beech held up his wine and studied the candle points through it. "Well, I'm sorry, devilish sorry, for I was very fond of your mother."

Jasper made no answer.

Beech went on. "There's a certain amount of 'Merrett' in you for those who have eyes to see. You miss their bulk; too slim and sinewy; and of course the colour is all wrong."

"You don't like it!" said Jasper, rather nettled at the other's personalities.

Beech looked coolly at him. "On the other hand, I do; and I shall like you. For the sake of your mother—that's one woman—I am going to do well, what—because of another woman—I have done badly."

"My aunt and the weeds?"

"No, the weeds and my wife! That is the story I hinted just now. Would you like to hear it?"

Jasper hesitated. "I have no claim to your confidence, Mr. Beech."

The latter smiled with a sadness that seemed incongruous to the big red face and indolent eyes. "As the son of your mother, my boy, you have a

claim upon me which you can push to any extent. Do you believe me?"

Jasper bowed slightly. "I am bound to do so."

"Well, then, I'll tell you the story. If I don't, somebody else will. 'Tis an oldish tale, but Swainswick remembers it; stories are not born here every new moon. There is a Mrs. Beech. I can't promise you the pleasure of her acquaintance, for I haven't seen her for ten years. You are not thinking of marrying, I suppose?"

"No," answered Jasper, and immediately the doggerel of the midsummer charm began to sing through his mind. His guest laughed a little uncomfortably. "My story will do as a parable for you. I have told you how I lost—or rather never had any chance of winning—your mother. Well, I was a pretty fine fellow in those days, none of this burden of flesh about me." He slapped his huge thighs. "There were other maids who would have had me, but I gave no thought to marriage, at least for a round dozen of years after Barbara Merrett disappeared." Beech stretched out his hand to the bottle. "Don't spare it," exclaimed Jasper. The big man filled up his glass again. "You know, or will know very soon, an old shepherd named Solomon Gosling."

"I know him; he is a pensioner on the estate."

"That's the man. A curious old bird he is, with a nose like a hawk's beak and steeped in all the tomfoolery of the dark ages."

Jasper drew in the quick deep breath that was habitual with him in moments of excitement. "Go on," he said, "and don't forget that there is myth or symbol in every flash and crackle of a gipsy's camp-fire."

Beech nodded. "Well, old Gosling found a wench running a charm race round the church one Midsummer Eve and married her."

"I know the charm," said Jasper.

Beech looked surprised. "The devil you do! You can guess my story."

"I want you to tell it. I won't interrupt again."

"Solomon had told me the tale several times; he was rather proud of his dealings with the powers of darkness. And it happened one Midsummer Eve, when the moon and all the rest of it were in favourable conjunction, that I was starting away from Swainswick just at midnight. To my astonishment, just as I was passing the church gate, a girl commenced to play the love-chase. I knew her, and prompted by ale and the occasion I joined in. A marriage duly followed, and my present condition is the sequel to the story."

"The marriage was unfortunate?"

"It didn't last; we were ill-mated. The bride was handsome enough, clever enough, rich enough; but she was of better breeding than I am, many years younger, had town ways and tastes, and could not settle down to the humdrum life on my farm. She was not a native of the hills, but came here from time to time—usually the summer time—and stayed with friends. We endured one another for about five years, and then she disappeared without even a 'good-bye.' That's all, except that I ought to say she bought the farm that I held as tenant. It is hers still. I pay no rent, and I stick to it because it was once the freehold of my family. I cultivate it as badly as possible because, some day, it must come into the possession of her people. That is my story. The moral is, 'Don't dabble in devilry when seeking a wife!'" He lifted his glass. "Here's better luck to you, my boy!"

After the toast Beech sat silent again, absent-mindedly twisting the slender wineglass round and round in his fingers; there were visions in the fire for him just then. Jasper's mind, too, took a quick dive into a past he had never known in its reality, and groped about in the darkness, hoping to find something, he knew not what.

More and more he began to feel like a man standing upon the little ledge of sunlit land of the life he knew, whilst behind him there lay a vast and shadowy cave of the hidden and the secret, weirdly vocal with the sighings of restless ghosts. Whose spirits flitted there, and what message might they have for him? Did they regard him as an alien, a usurper? If his aunt and his mother watched him out of the shrouding mirk, what thoughts of him arose in their shadow minds?

Once more Beech broke the silence. "I am sorry you will not talk about your mother, Mr. Barrow," he said, and sighed; and a thing so ephemeral as a sigh seemed ludicrous as an emanation from such a hillock of heaving flesh.

Jasper made no reply. The big farmer leaned forward. "It's hard!" he exclaimed. "You ought to understand, my boy, that I not only loved Barbara Merrett very dearly, nearly thirty years ago, but that I love her memory now; and thirty years is a long time. Thirty years on these hills, and only one dream! My God!"

Jasper looked up. "One dream?" he echoed.

"Ay, one dream. That's my life! I loved your mother. I married years after, as I have told you; that was yielding to a temptation of the flesh, for the woman was handsome. It turned

out badly, as it deserved to do, and I hope the woman has found some sort of happiness elsewhere. I can wish her that, for I am living upon her bounty." He fell into silence again for a minute, gazing upon the dark mask of Barrow's face. "There's one thing, as a faithful lover, that I have a claim to know," he said, with a challenge in his heavy voice. "I have kept my heart true to the vision of one woman; tell me when she died!"

"Eight years ago this coming winter," replied Jasper.

"Thank you; the month?"

"November the third."

"Thank you again." Beech finished his wine and rose up. "You will probably think, Mr. Barrow, that a great ox-like fellow like myself has no right to be sentimental. If you do, then you've something to learn. The most callous little devil I ever met in my life might have passed amongst silly women for a poet; he looked the part. The hangman's job would have suited him better." He held out his hand, and Jasper rose up and took it. "I am glad you looked in, Mr. Beech. I think we shall be good neighbours when we get to know one another."

Beech smiled. "If you ask me, my boy, I

think we know one another pretty well already. This handshake on my part means friendship to the end; don't forget that!"

"I won't," said Jasper. "I am really grateful to you for your kind expressions."

"Then, good-night! We are friends—for your mother's sake."

CHAPTER IX

THE WOMAN

His guest gone, Barrow sat dreaming by the fire. The gipsy in him leaned strongly to superstition, and his mind insisted that the visit of his neighbour and his own impulsive doings of the previous night were fatefully linked. And surely it was not chance that had made the man the lover of Barbara Merrett and ruled that his marriage destiny should be guided by the old peasant, who already had sent Jasper along a misty and mystic path whose windings were a secret that only time could explore.

His thoughts flew to the old house at the bottom of the valley and the vision of a beautiful maiden standing in the light of the candles. The image gripped him, and presently breathed out to him its woman personality and the soul that dwelt within. Desire came upon him. The tale of Matthew Beech had suggested far more than it had told, and it stirred the solitary master of Sheepdene more

than the breathing self of Julia Carden had stirred him the previous night. He had pledged himself in the midsummer fantasy and had left a token; most assuredly he must in honour redeem it. He knew that had he gone so far with a gipsy maid marriage would have followed inevitably and speedily; and a maid was a maid all the world over.

He looked at his watch; it was eleven o'clock. He had knelt at a girl's feet at the birth of the Midsummer Day; there was yet an hour left to him. Outside the storm was rolling up again, beating across the Beacon from the Severn valley to echo and re-echo its thunders along the trough between Sheepdene and Swainswick. The rain was pouring from the wide eaves of the house on to the pathway beyond his windows, and vivid flashes of jagged light revealed the landscape in a bluish, quivering glare. Storms were nothing to him who had been suckled unsheltered amidst the elements; he would go down to the old house and the statuesque girl.

Barrow did not pause to consider how unlikely it was that a young woman would be sitting up close upon midnight with the house door unbarred for the entry of a stranger. He was not dealing with reasonable affairs but with matters magically

controlled. In spite of one victim's warning he was setting forth "to dabble with devilry for a wife"—or the chance of one. He was not in love with the midnight maiden and had no present inclination for marriage. The spirit of adventure and the demon of superstition were allied to lead him forth upon a quest, and he was resolved to follow them no matter what might be the outcome of his journey.

He stood up and stretched himself. The silence was broken by a rapping at the door, a summons strangely unlike that beaten out by the ponderous fist of Beech. Swiftly the thought came to Jasper that it was a woman who knocked, and he fancied there was pleading rather than demand in the quick succession of tappings. To the man in the grip of night and superstition there was only one possible "she"; because he had not gone to her, the maid of the feast was come to him. He saw nothing preposterous in the idea; it was simply the ordinarily impossible made orthodox by circumstances.

Before he could move to the door he heard it open. How? He had locked it after Beech, and the key was in his pocket. To make sure he was not dreaming he thrust in his hand and fingered it. Incapable for the moment of any movement

he waited for Fate to come to him; he dared make no advance to meet her.

The hall was unlighted except by the flashes of the lightning, yet footsteps were crossing the flags with a sureness that argued guidance. A hand touched the door, moved for a moment along the panels, and then gripped the handle. The door opened. A woman cloaked and hooded from the weather stood upon the threshold and stared at him. She was not the maiden of the love-chase. The face was fairer, older, wearied to the point of sadness, but it was an arresting face with a beauty of its own. Barrow stood, one hand upon the table and the other upon his hip, and stared at the hooded apparition.

Words came first from the woman. "I beg your pardon," she said, "I want Miss Merrett."

To be asked for one's dead relative within a few pulses of midnight by a mysterious stranger was not a thing to soothe Barrow's nerves. He pulled himself up sharply and glanced behind him, half wondering whether anything had appeared there also. There was nothing but space, the wide fireplace, and a few grey ashes. For the moment there was no sound save the slow ticking of the clock. Once again Jasper fingered his key and glanced at his visitor's hands to see if she possessed

any duplicate by means of which she had obtained entry to the house. He recollected that the place had been closed for months; and the stranger's hands were empty, her eyes as full of questions as his own.

The woman awaited an answer. The man looked at her and saw that the water draining from her cloak was making a pool on the floor. Her right hand was stretched out to the side post of the doorway for support, and her utter fatigue was evident. She was no peasant, and her voice had little or nothing of the upland burr. Evidence pointed to her as one who was a stranger from afar and ignorant of his aunt's death. Jasper found his voice. "Will you come in, madam?" he said.

The woman came forward and her steps dragged. Jasper hastened to meet her and courteously offered to relieve her of her cloak. She looked him steadily in the eyes for a moment, murmured, "Thank you!" and stood whilst he deftly undid the fastenings and took the sodden garment off. Putting a chair for her he carried the cloak into the hall, returning again instantly. The stranger turned at the snick of the door catch and his eyes met hers to discover how large and strangely blue they were. Her hair was tumbled by the

hood and damp with the rain, but in spite of that its fair colour and fine texture made it becomingly pretty. She was slighter in build than he had imagined, and her figure more girlish than the face had promised; nevertheless, she was not young as his youth counted years.

He came forward and stood almost beside her. "You asked for Miss Merrett," he said.

"Yes," she replied. "I am late. Has she gone to bed?"

Jasper hesitated over his answer. "Miss Merrett was my aunt; she is dead!"

The woman's attitude suddenly lost the lines of fatigue. "Dead! dead!" she echoed.

"Many weeks ago," added Jasper.

The woman drooped again in weariness and thought. Her next words betrayed the current of her thinking. "It is a fearful night!" she murmured.

Jasper responded quickly, for he, too, had been considering the strange situation. "If your home can be reached by walking, madam, I beg you will accept my escort; if not——"

"Yes?"

"This house is yours for tonight."

"I have come from beyond the borders of the county."

"Then you are welcome to such rough hospitality as I can offer."

The stranger smiled for the first time. "Sheepdene hospitality has never been rough."

Jasper bowed acknowledgment of the compliment, but added: "I ought to explain, madam, that I am alone in the house, and by that I mean absolutely alone; there is no maid on the premises, nor has there been one since my aunt's death. This is my first night here and I cannot really tell you what accommodation Sheepdene affords for visitors. You probably know the place far better than I do."

The stranger rose up. "If the night were only fine"—she began, when a gesture of Jasper's stopped her. "The night is *not* fine," he said. "Of course, it is for you to decide what you will do. There are cottages near——"

"I cannot go there," she exclaimed hastily.

"I will relight the fire," said Jasper.

"And—and would you mind closing the shutters? The lightning terrifies me." Jasper had given no thought to the windows and the fact that any night prowler might look in and discover his guest, who had come in the darkness and evidently in secret. He closed the heavy oaken shutters and barred them, so that Sheepdene House to the

96237B

outer world was at last in darkness. He took the opportunity of glancing at his watch; it was just midnight, and all hope of going down to the midsummer maid was past. He shrugged his shoulders. Fate had decided!

Part of a faggot of sticks lay beside the hearth, and he soon had a big fire blazing. The woman had not spoken since her request for the closing of the shutters. He drew a roomy and comfortable chair to the ingle nook. "Will you take this?" he said. "Your boots must be soaked." Seeing how utterly wearied—even ill—she appeared, and moved by a sudden impulse, he knelt down and removed the boots. The deluge had beaten through the fastenings, and the drippings from cloak and dress had penetrated to her feet; her stockings were as wet as though they had been dipped in a pool. For just an instant Jasper held one small foot in his hands and looked at her meaningly. The woman flushed. "Yes," she said, answering his glance, "ceremony is misplaced under such conditions as these." She drew the chair closer to the fire and took off her wet stockings. Jasper gave her his handkerchief to dry her feet, then turned away to put wine and the remains of his own supper upon the table, dragging this to the fireplace so that his guest might not

move again in order to eat. By the time these preparations were complete, the woman had slipped off her outer skirt, the lower part of which was almost as heavy with the wet as the cloak Jasper had removed. He made no apology for the scantiness of the supper he offered; it was the whole solid contents of his larder and had been intended for his own breakfast next morning.

When, after some pressing, his guest began to eat, Jasper drew a chair to the other side of the hearth and let his thoughts gallop at the pace to which events had spurred them. His reverie was a long one, and the voice of the woman broke it. "You are Miss Merrett's nephew," she said.

"Yes."

"I never knew her to mention your name."

Jasper shrugged slightly. "Jasper Barrow," he said.

Silence fell again, and Jasper felt that the woman was watching him intently. "You ask me no questions," she said at length; "have you no curiosity?"

Jasper looked into the blue eyes fixed searchingly upon him. "You knew my aunt," he replied. "You had the key to her house. Yet you knew nothing of her death. You come by night and carry a burden that is a secret hidden

from Sheepdene. What right have I to know it?"

A long pause followed these words. The woman lay back in her chair, her eyes half closed, her hands lying in her lap; the bare feet, showing pink in the warmth of the fire, were crossed on the stool that Jasper had placed for them. The storm was passing away, and the big raindrops no longer splashed down the wide chimney to hiss in the flames.

For a minute or so Jasper leaned forward, his arms on his knees, and stared into the fire. Then he sat up, half turned to his companion, and watched her, noting things that had gone unheeded before. The eyes were long-lashed and heavy-lidded; the perfect oval of the face in youth was broken by hollows in temples and cheeks that time or sorrow had moulded; the lips were pressed hard one upon the other, their fulness marred and the beauty of their curves pitifully destroyed—the smoothness was gone from the white column of the throat, and the heave of the bosom was shallow, although her breathing was steady and deep. The firelight, playing upon her face, darkened its hollows, pencilled its lines, and accentuated its pallor. She was a woman who had suffered and was not yet out of her agony.

Barrow had never before studied a woman at such close quarters and for so long a time. For years he had been but little in the tents of his fathers, and the black-eyed beauties had awakened no thrill in him; he had developed a deep, even fierce, love for his mother; they were utterly unlike her, and that was enough to seal his heart against them. Now the woman before him had the Saxon fairness that to him was a sign of Gorgio purity and nobility; she was in some way an outcast from those she might have called her people; he had been a stranger, mocked and nicknamed, amongst those that imaged his mother in form and tongue and religion; he was going far along the road that led to outlawry from the smoky tents and gaudy caravans of the nomads whose name he bore. His sympathies—partly born of the storm, the ghostly hour, and the appeal of her sex—went out sharply to her. He began to dream who she might be; then his thoughts strayed to the other women he had met in Swainswick, to Sophie Watkin and the maid of the love supper. He fell to comparing the three, and his eyes sought their faces in the glowing fire. There was the flower-like beauty of Sophie, the handsome dignity and Venus fulness and ripeness of the other, and the stricken, blighted comeliness of

her who lay half slumbering within reach of his hand.

The clock struck one, and the boom of the gong aroused the stranger. She sat up, shivered a little, and chafed her hands gently as though they were cold. Jasper arose, poured out a little more wine, and offered it to her without a word. She sipped it, put it down, and turned the blue, heavy-lidded eyes upon him.

"It is very late."

"One o'clock."

"And I am keeping you from your bed; please forgive me! Sorrow makes one selfish. I ought to remember that an unbidden guest owes a double debt to her host. You have given me supper and a fire. I can find the rest that I want here in this chair. I am very grateful." She stretched out her hand for good-night.

Jasper ignored the hint. "I am not going to bed," he said; "there is, I expect, but one room in the house that is habitable at present, and that is the one I had prepared for myself. It is immediately above this; you must take it. I have slept 'rough' a thousand times; it was part of my early training. You are still damp and need a bed. I will—if you have no objection—go into the room and close the shutters for you,

leaving the candle ready. You know the way upstairs?"

"I know the way, and the room; and I am—God knows!—touched by your great courtesy and kindness; but I must stay here!" The voice was warm with emotion, and the hand remained outstretched. Barrow took it. "I will put the candle ready," he said. The woman's other hand fell upon his in entreaty. "Please let me have my own way!" she exclaimed. "There are many reasons; let one suffice. I must be gone from here as soon as day breaks. It will be light enough for me to see my way in an hour's time, and the rain will probably be over by then. Take my thanks, my 'God bless you!' if it is worth anything, and say 'Good-night!'"

Jasper hesitated for just a perceptible instant of time, then returned the pressure of her hands and said "Good-night!" Within a stride of the door he turned and came back again to put the remainder of the wood faggot upon the fire. As he stooped over the hearth he said, "I wish you would take my bed, madam," and received a murmured "No! no!" in reply. Still with his back turned he asked, "Would you like me to walk some of the way with you when you set out?"

There was no answer.

"I can drive you some miles and cover you so that you need not be seen. The roads and the hill paths will be bad for walking. I only desire to offer you the courtesies you might expect if my aunt had been here to meet you."

Hearing a quick "Thank you!" he straightened himself and held out his hand for a second "Good-night!" The woman took it and held it. "Why do you think of pleasing the spirit of your aunt?" she asked. "She hated you."

"I did not hate her, and would have been glad to love her; that is all," he answered. She released his hand and he went away for a last time. As he opened the door he said, "There will be no need for you to start so early as you proposed. When I am ready I will tap at this door." Without waiting for an answer he stepped into the hall.

CHAPTER X

HALF A SECRET

WHEN Jasper Barrow stood at length at his bedroom window, the moon, riding westwards, was breaking through the pall of storm cloud, making fleecy wisps of their straggling ends and revealing the vast deeps of summer blue that lay behind. The trees in the copse beyond the lawn stood heavy and motionless, ceaselessly dripping their burden of wet. An owl, that had moped supperless, afraid of the clamour of the heavens and the tempest of rain, now found its voice in a melancholy and complaining "tu-whit, tu-whoo!" which awakened a response from the throat of an equally hungry neighbour in the thatched eaves of the long barn. Rills of water rushed down the slopes, and as the moon space grew in the heavens, silvery pools stood revealed in a dozen places on the bosom of the earth, that had been baked to so brick-like a hardness that it could not absorb the deluge for which it had thirsted so long. Jasper's

eyes took instinctive notice of these things, but his brain was too choked with thought to receive them as a lasting impression. He was aware that the moon was struggling to shed her light on a sodden earth and that there was a chance of a fine morning for his guest to travel, and that was all.

At first his thoughts were all of her, but as the light grew and brought out of the darkness the points of landscape that were stepping-stones to the valley and up the hill to Swainswick, his thoughts harked back to the hot and panting scenes of the previous night, and he had the vision of perfect womanly beauty standing in the small but golden radiance of candle light. Here were cheeks whose roundness had no fault of line or hollow, a smooth white brow unpuckered by thought, drooping eyelids that hid a beauty as yet unrevealed to him, and a form of such maidenly symmetry that its perfection was a temptation in itself. What a fool he had been not to follow out the adventure!

Barrow slept but ill and was up again before the sun. His cupboard was too lean to provide a breakfast for his guest, so finding his shepherd astir and anxious about the lambs, he borrowed the best that was in the man's larder. He prepared the meal himself, setting it in the kitchen and

calling his visitor when it was ready. Remembering that she carried a secret, he got ready the gig and drove off by a way that kept him along the hills opposite to Swainswick.

They saw no one on the uplands, and the valley was a pocket of mist that the rosy fingers of the sun had not yet rifled for its myriad jewels upon each leaf and twig and blade of grass. His companion did not raise her head or speak until a shoulder of the hill hid them from Sheepdene and the valley; then her whole attitude changed. She sat up like a woman from whose shoulders a great burden had dropped and chatted freely and pleasantly so that Jasper found that she could be as charming as she had been sad. A clearer light seemed to come from the blue eyes and a firmer ring from her voice. Much of the hardness went from the lips to show how tempting the mouth had been once upon a time.

She coaxed Jasper into talking about his past life, and he found himself telling her things that had been secrets locked away in his own breast for many a year. She questioned him about his projected life at Sheepdene and entered keenly into his domestic plans, giving him shrewd bits of advice here and there. She approved of Jane Gosling, but cautioned him against the garrulity

of old Sol; it was evident that she knew the old folks intimately. Jasper, on his part, was eager to learn something about his mother's family, and she gave him a vivid and sympathetic picture of his aunt, dealing affectionately with the old lady's virtues and gently with her many foibles and weaknesses; he gathered that there had been a strong bond of liking between the two, although the one must have been more than double the age of the other.

A pause came to their conversation as they were dropping sharply down towards the lower heights and steep streets of Hillborough. It was broken when she suddenly asked Jasper to take a road to the left which led them a half-circuit outside the upper town. She smiled as she made the request. "I am not asking you to do this in order that I may keep my secret, but because I wish to tell you, at least, some of it. Will you listen?"

"Of course I will," replied Jasper.

"I shall tell you certain things because I feel that I owe you some explanation."

"But I make no claim," he said.

"And that makes it all the more impossible for me to keep you in entire ignorance," she replied. "I was not born amongst these hills, but I have

known them for half my life. I was married in Swainswick Church. My only child was born in your aunt's house. He is dead now. Had he lived he would have mended two broken lives." The woman stopped. Presently she said, "I meant to tell you a more connected story than that, but the words refuse to come. Is it enough for you to understand me?"

"I should like to know," said Jasper quietly, "if you have been coming to Sheepdene every year at this time?"

"Yes, for many years. I ran away from my own home. The coming of my child brought me back again, and I meant that he should be the offering of peace to my husband. There were reasons that made me go away without carrying out my purpose, just at that time, but I meant to return again in a little while. My boy died. His father does not know that he ever lived. Year after year at a certain time I have come to Sheepdene; and year after year I have gone away again, saying nothing, doing nothing. It is too late to speak now, and I shall never come again. I must try to begin a new life after today."

The woman bowed her head, and not another word was spoken until they were in the streets of Hillborough. Then she asked timidly, "Do you

understand?" Jasper replied, "I do!" Then he added: "If at any time you wish to be at Sheepdene and will send me word, the house shall be empty of all except Jane Gosling."

The streets of the little town were full of folk hurrying to the mills, and they had no time to bestow in curiosity upon two strangers riding at an unwonted hour into the place. Jasper's companion directed him to a small cottage in a side street, where she proposed to wait until about nine o'clock when a public conveyance would be going into Peterminster. They had driven through the streets in silence, but just as the gig stopped the woman spoke again. "Mr. Barrow," she said, "I am already indebted to you for a great courtesy and kindness; will you do me another favour?"

"Most certainly," he answered. "What is it?"

"For many reasons I should like to speak to Jane Gosling. Could you go directly back to Swainswick and let Solomon drive her in? I will promise not to keep her more than half-an-hour."

"I will bring her in myself."

"But that is troubling you too much."

"Not at all, I assure you. I can easily find business here to occupy me until you set off at nine o'clock. Solomon can go to Sheepdene for a light wagon to convey any of his goods to his new

quarters, and I can carry his wife home with me. I have told you they are taking up service with me."

"Yes."

"Then my convenience will be yours."

"I am deeply, deeply grateful to you, Mr. Barrow; you believe that, don't you?"

"I believe it. Will you let me say how much I value the trust you have put in me?" He laughed the hard little laugh that Jim Watkin did not like. "No woman of my mother's race has treated me as you have done. I think it will do me good." He helped her from the gig and knocked at the door. It was opened, and the woman entered the house, welcomed without perceptible surprise. Jasper noted that the stare of astonishment was reserved for him. He turned the horse round and drove towards the main street and the Swainswick road. He felt a satisfaction in knowing that old Jane would be a link between the life that lay before him and the romance and mystery that had come to him out of the past. Why had his strange guest suddenly desired to see Jane?

The brain of the Master of Sheepdene was not the only one in the village that was busied that morning with the mysterious. The wife of his carter coming round to the house to "tidy up a bit for the maister," found doors open, the house

empty, and ample evidence that two people had breakfasted in the kitchen at a very early hour. She went along to the shepherd's cottage with the news and found her neighbour bemoaning a raid upon her scanty larder. A sleepy-eyed urchin came downstairs to relate that he had been wakened by the sound of the gig wheels, and had stolen to the window to see the squire drive along the lane with a lady whose head and face were covered by a hood.

Both women went to the big house to probe the mystery. They discovered that two had supped also, but only one had slept. Here were riddles, strange doings by strange people, and no amount of prying and talking served to unravel them. Later in the morning Jasper drove home with Jane Gosling. Questioning glances met them from the cottage doorways and the shrewd old woman was not blind to them. She wondered whether she—or another—was the reason for them, and resolved that it would be well if she kept a certain secret from Solomon. As for her master there was a need to watch over him, for she held a secret of his although she had whispered it into the ears of his late visitor in a cottage parlour at Hillborough. To come into the dignity of her new office burdened with two such tales was a trouble to the old woman, wise as she was, for she had

lived long enough to learn that mysteries breed mischief. Charms were a matter of words spoken rightly according to spirit and season and circumstance, yet the wagging of a tongue might undo them.

The tongue wagged the next day over the wash tub at Miss Trotter's, and Julia Carden, busied with the baking of cakes in the kitchen, overheard what was said, for Polly Woodyatt, the carter's wife, was loud voiced, being the mother of a host of unruly children.

Julia had had two visions dancing and interchanging before her eyes. The one was of a half-seen man kneeling at her feet at midnight and pledging her in wine over which a spell had been cast; the other was a handsome figure on horseback that chained her eyes, yet had not a glance for her. When she had laughed with Jane Gosling over the midnight adventure she had not seen the latter vision, nor had she given up a hope that the master of Sheepdene would gallantly dare to repeat by day the visit he had paid by night. Surely he must know that the one was the sequel to the other, and "if," as she said to herself, "it was only romantic fun with him as it was with me, he might play the little comedy through!" Both might treat the matter quite good-humouredly and laugh

over it. After all they were going to be neighbours and the merry nonsense of their first acquaintance need be no bar to pleasant relations in the future.

But the dark man was shrouding himself in shadows—the moon-mist of midnight, the sun-shadow of Sophie Watkin, the dim figure of a hooded woman who came by night and went with the dawn. And the dark man was handsome and a new figure on the girl's horizon; she wanted to know him and was piqued that he had not come. For two nights she had dreamt of him and knew that the dream would persist until he gave the interpretation; and the jingle of old Jane's fatalistic sayings was equally insistent in her memory. With a strange quiver of apprehension she felt that she might end by believing them. The lonely, dreamy girl had something to think about at last, and she could not laugh it away now that mysteries were deepening around it. She wished Barrow had not looked so handsome on horseback. If he had been coarse-featured or ill-shaped; if there had been no hungering look in Sophie's eyes; if—if—Julia threw off her apron and hurried to her common-sense aunt to talk about cakes.

But the pros and cons of the right mixing of cakes failed to satisfy the hunger of mind that craved after a knowledge of deeper things. And

Polly Woodyatt's voice sing-songed from the wash-house chanting all the gossip she had gathered in a week. Julia went into the garden, from which she could see the gabled pile of Sheepdene House. Maybe, by looking upon the stone shell that housed the mysterious she might in some subtle way "sense" the mystery.

CHAPTER XI

A PHILOSOPHER IN CORDUROY

FROM the windows of the dining parlour at Sheepdene one could see, at the bottom of the valley, the curve of the tall hedgerow behind which lay the "house with the dormers." In winter, when the bushes of maple and hazel were bare, it was just possible to outline the house as though through an intricate lattice-work, but in summer not even a chimney or the ridge of the highest gable was visible.

It was the first of July, and the last of a thin hay-crop was being cocked on the bosom of the sloping fields. A solitary cuckoo was shouting his going-away call, "cuck-cuckoo, cuck-cuckoo!" from an oak that was a landmark at the steepest dip of the road. Barrow was indulging in what was rapidly becoming a habit; he was standing at a window and gazing fixedly upon the nook that sheltered, for him, the most engrossing mystery of all the beautiful valley and its engirdling hills.

The mystery was a maid's eyes. In day-dreams, in the visions of the night, he could see every coil of the luxuriant brown tresses and picture every inviting curve of perfect maidenly grace; but the eyes he knew not. He had painted them every colour that eyes might be; he had imagined them soft and dreamy, appealing and tender, proud and contemptuous, flashing and angry. What were they? Which of the many souls that could inhabit a woman's body dwelt in their depths? The question racked him until it was becoming a torture.

Old Jane was clearing away his tea. Her rustic philosophy had taught her the crude truth of the animalism of man; she knew that the beasts loved the hand that fed them and that men in this particular were only super-beasts. Never having felt the pangs and joys of motherhood the old woman scorned the notion that the peculiar love of a child for its mother was evidence of the yearning of a part for the whole whence it had offsprung; to her it was the hunger of toothless gums for the breasts that soothed them. She craved jealously for the affection of her young master, and true to her half-pagan and earthly ideals she brought in all his meals with her own hands, prepared most of them, and suffered none to

enter the room whilst food was on the table. She, alone of the household, knew how often he looked down upon the dwelling-place of a certain maiden; and she knew that a maid looked ofttimes across the stream and up the hill, her eyes filled with dreams and questions. The magic was working in the hearts of both, and Jane smiled a little grimly. Folks might live and learn to scoff at the earth-wisdom of their forefathers, but Mother Earth still turned over nightly in her sleep, and a brood of invisible imps escaped from her bosom to dwell in the hearts of the men and the maids who were her earth-children.

She walked to the window. "'Tis bad to be always looking down on the roof," said she. "Folks that be overlooked doan't thrive. Stare into the fire too long and coffins will jump out." Jane gathered up the tea tray and went out of the room. Jasper looked after her, suddenly conscious of what he had been doing day after day. Jane's words were evidently meant as a warning. What was its import? He suspected that she knew all about the episode of Midsummer Eve. Was she rebuking him for dalliance with a duty to which she deemed him pledged? Were her words a warning against any further traffic with the occult? Had she conveyed to him a subtle

message from the maid who still waited for him? The old woman had chatted to him freely enough about his neighbours at Sheepdene and Swainswick, but he remembered that she had only told him about one household in answer to his own pointed questions. Such reticence now appeared significant. Well, he would overlook the house no more. There were invisible threads upon his feet pulling him in a certain direction, and every day the pulls had grown stronger. He would resist them no longer but let them lead him whither they would. He went out. It was half-past five, the sun still riding high, the shadows short, and the whole valley filled with the hot summer sunshine.

One way led down through his own fields where the haymakers were at work. Solomon, besmocked and gaitered, was superintending their labours, and with the long-sighted vision of old age he quickly recognized the straight figure of the "young maister" swinging down the hill. The old fellow, limp with the heat, was just considering whether his duties could not be efficiently discharged from a seat on the shady side of a haycock, but all thought of rest was quickly abandoned. Solomon had his pride and the obstinate determination of green old age not to acknowledge its limitations. He shuffled

off through the stubble towards the line of men and women that was headed by Job Woodyatt, the carter, a squat fellow, who wielded a slow pitchfork and moved at the pace of a man who had spent all his life plodding behind the patient farm horse. He was an admirable leader in a long day's toil, but a poor hand in a spurt of exhibition work. Just then Sol wanted show and was quite ready to set rhythm for their arms and legs in the lilt of a jovial song.

"Now, carter, sprack's the word, sprack's the word; eyes be on 'ee!" he exclaimed.

Job stopped, leaned upon his fork for thirty exasperating seconds, and blinked six slow blinks at Solomon. "Be 'em?" he said; "well, let 'em be!" He went on as before, the whole line stopping and setting off again like the parts of a perfect machine.

Solomon propped himself into an upright position by the help of his stick and tried again. "Used to move hay quicker'n this in my young days," he said.

"Ay," answered Job, and leaned up for another rest, every other bent back following suit. "World's slowin' down I reckon, gran'feyther; gettin' old, so to speak; end's not fur off if the prophets knows their gospel.

"This wórld untó an eńd shall coṁe
In eighteen húndred and eighty-oṅe!

Ther' ye are, five and twenty more years on't, and we shall all be sweatin' in the fervent heat accordin' to the words of the Book."

Job stooped down again and thrust his fork into the fragrant swathe, and Sol cast an eye up the hill. "Well, 'twill be something at the Day o' Judgment to say that ye tossed hay well," he said encouragingly. Job came to another aggravating halt. He spat on the ground and rubbed a thoughtful hand across his mouth. "Ther's a lot ye han't larned, gran'feyther. The Book says that in that day 'Time shall be no more!' Now when there's no clocks ther'll be no tellin' to 'ee how much ye did in a hower. The question will be, 'Have this man worked fair and with the gumption his talents have bestowed upon 'un?' Ye be weatherwise enough to know that the sun will have no cloud to hide 'un to-morrow or the next day and that not a handful of his hay will be spoiled. Maister won't suffer and ther'll be no callin' us unprofitable servants."

"Well, here he be," cried Sol, "and he have caught ye all idlin'." Job turned a slow head towards the stile in time to see Jasper leap nimbly over. A big strapping wench named Sally Bur-

dock stood next to the leader. She hastily pitched a fork of hay. "Why doan't 'ee move along, carter, not talk such talk as gives I the shivers in spite of the fire in it," she cried. But Job was not to be moved. "A man should think thoughts of his mortal end whenever they do come to 'un," he replied. "Now here be you, Sairey, goin' to be married at Michaelmas when your year be up. That'll give ye time to have a da'rter, and she to grow up and have a da'rter also before the trump do sound." Job waved a hand in the direction of the western sky to indicate the judgment blast would come thence, and proceeded to set the line of works in steady progress again. Jasper came up. "Warm work, Solomon," he said.

"Just about, maister; wets the shirt but dries the hay; we've nigh on finished and can haul to-marrer. Fairish crop when ye do come to look in to 't.'

"Reckon my hosses will have summat to say about the thistles," grumbled Job. "If Farmer Beech doan't mend his ways the folks in thease pairts'll have to take to donkeys."

"He's going to mend, carter," replied Jasper cheerfully.

"Is a' now!" exclaimed Job. "I'll believe it when I do see 'un working out his repentance wi' a

hoe. Wher' shall we haul to, maister, the rick yard or put 'un up in the corner of the ground?"

"Solomon will tell you."

"Ay, ay; forgot for the minute he were gaffer."

Sol mopped his brow. The carter was the thorn in the flesh of his new authority. Jasper walked on to the gate at the bottom of the field leading into the lane and the last downward stretch to the stream and the house of his short pilgrimage. The labourers paused to watch him. To them he was still a mystery, and an absorbing one, seeing that he was lord of their circumscribed destinies.

Sally Burdock sighed, a big sigh from the deeps of her ample maidenly bosom where the beribboned little figure of rustic romance sat enthroned, little witting that the clumsy spear of Mr. Conjugal Reality would soon come thrusting in to topple him headlong. Sally came of a family whose women produced their kind with startling rapidity and regularity, and marriage seldom released them long from the labours of the field, only adding burdens that gave them scant rest at night after the toil of the day. They were heroic in mould and did bravely in their hand-to-hand battle with life, but Nature grudged them that sufficiency of wit which would have enabled them to see their own excellent proportions. They

developed no flattering conceit of themselves as goodly factors in the scheme of things, and so were denied the solace given to more pretentious and deliberate martyrs. Sally had a big heart and a soft one, that had at times threatened to be too unruly for strict respectability, but she had fought its stormy impulses gallantly and now had the haven of marriage in sight. And marriage meant a cottage and a husband with ten shillings a week. The future husband was a sturdy, freckled, clod-footed Hodge, on one of the Swainswick farms. Sally was no beauty, but just a healthy country wench, with big round limbs, full rosy cheeks, and a skin of matchless whiteness where the sun had not dyed it; a woman in every fibre of her.

Sally sighed again, a sigh that seemed but an echo of the first one. "'Tis nice to be working for a man again," she said; "working for a woman bain't the same sort o' thing at all."

"Shill'uns doan't ring so merry, eh, Sairey?" said Job, beginning to set up a fresh haycock.

"They doan't, carter, and that's the truth. What do 'ee think of 'un?" She jerked her head in Jasper's direction.

"Well, he's a queer quist,[1] as the devil said of the owl."

[1] Wood-pigeon.

The mysterious in one man that breeds suspicion in another only deepens the interest that a woman feels in him whether she be clothed in silk or shoddy. "I do like 'un," said Sally; "his body do bend as easy and as lissom as a sapling in the wind, and when the white teeth of 'un do flash out in his dark face my heart do give a fair jump. 'Tis in my mind that I won't get married this Michaelmas after all, but hire with 'un for a year. I might get into the house."

"Ah!" ejaculated Job.

"Perhaps wait on 'un."

"Ay," grunted the carter; "make his bed, maybe."

Sally sighed and stopped work. "'Twould be something to feel that he dreamed on the pillow ye'd smoothed for his head."

"More hay," said Job.

Sally tossed him a couple of forkfuls. "I'd like it, just about!"

"You'm a fool! Silly women and wenches be always throwin' their bodies wher' 'tis damnation for their souls. More hay!"

Sally obliged. Job went on. "When we men do dream of our fancies and the angels they be always fair, goldy fair, and blue eyes. Wi' women 'tis different; colour comes from t'other place.

Reckon 'tis all on account o' the Garden of Eden and the first woman taking the fruit from the hands o' Satan. Never could size up women myself; wus'n hosses they be. You bain't workin', Sairey; your heart and your head be just about as soft as butter!"

Jasper had disappeared and Solomon called a halt. "Cider jar be under fourth cock against the hedge," he said.

"Then you might fetch 'un, gaffer," exclaimed Job. Sol's dignity reflected for an instant, but he went off on the errand. Sally sat down with her broad and aching back against the last haycock she had helped to make. She took off her sunbonnet and wiped her face with it. "I'd like to see the maister comfortable afore I left 'un," she said.

"He'll be making his own bed," was Job's rejoinder, "ay, even when he've got a wife to share it; maybe there'll be lumps amid the feathers that she can't smooth out; he's that sort."

"You think bad of 'un!" cried Sally angrily.

"I doan't; I think natural. If a hoss have got blood you can tell it by the way a' steps out and by the look of his eyes. Now this young man have got blood, hot rivers on't; and if a' bain't broken in properly his neighbours' fences won't kip 'un out o' their yards."

"Who'll break 'un in?" asked Sally, giving her perspiring face another wipe.

"The woman as knows his sort and have got a firm hand."

"Wher's her to?"

"He's gone to find her!"

"Wher'?"

Job pointed a finger down to the trees that hid Miss Trotter's.

"How do 'ee know he be gone ther'?" asked Sally quickly.

"I doan't know; but if a' passes the house we shall see 'un going up the lane to Swainswick."

Solomon came up with the cider. Sally Burdock watched the yellow-white ribbon of road that trailed through the swell of green. Mr. Jasper Barrow's figure did not move along it. Work began again. "Funny you should have guessed right," said Sally at length.

"I didn't guess," answered the carter. "I've seed 'un watchin' that place from one point or another forty times."

"Think her'll take 'un?"

"She's uncommon handsome."

"Ay?"

"A bit body-proud and have never had a lover."

"What then?"

"He'll have to ax more'n once."

Sally sighed. "You've sized she up pretty close."

"Like as not, I'm wrong," said Job doubtfully.

CHAPTER XII

AN OFFER OF REDEMPTION

JULIA CARDEN was not a paragon, but something that was a whole world more alluring than a pretty model in pink flesh so stuffed with virtues that no vice or naughtiness could squeeze in, not even a tiny one under the shelter of a drooping eyelid. She was a handsome girl, with strong coursing red blood and an amazing healthiness. Constant companionship with a clever but eccentric relative had developed or created little singularities in her own character. A lack of companions of her own age and station had made her self-centred, independent in thought and action. Solitude, and the hills looking down from far and near upon every window of the house, had made her a dreamer in a green-walled prison. And she dreamed, as she had read, of the world beyond the hills.

Dreams and the impulse for adventure, the restlessness of a prisoned spirit, had driven her to the adventure of Midsummer Eve. She had

expected nothing to happen, yet the event had brought her a breathless race down the hill, and she had wondered a hundred times since how she had nerved herself to play the ceremony through to the very letter of the myth. The lover had come at her call; she had seen him and found him desirable. She reviewed the curious sequence of chance that had brought them together and saw purpose in it. She told herself that so curious a chain of circumstances must have been forged wittingly by those who knew. But why had he never spoken? And who was the woman that had come to him by night? He was a mystery that she yearned to unravel.

A week had passed by, truly a long time for ardent girlhood to live alone with a mystery that deepened and became more elusive every day. Gossip was busy, and sometimes things were said of the dark stranger that stung her pride. He avoided the old grey house beside the stream, and she had never seen him since he had ridden in the summer glare through Swainswick.

Yet at last he came as she had desired, with the summer sunshine about him and the full-leaved trees nodding behind. And she was at the gate watching the hill and following his progress adown the billowy fields. Would he pass her by unheed-

ing as he had done before? She answered, "Yes," and stooped to her flowers.

But the lover was coming in soberest earnest, although his own piece of the lover's herb had died in an alien grate on a bed of repentant ashes. So he strode resolutely to the little gate, embushed by the willows that dipped to the stream, and, as though she had waited there days and nights for his laggard footsteps, raised his hat and said: "Miss Carden, I have come!" And he did it all with that supple grace and boldness and ingenuousness that shows at its best in those who have wild blood running warm in young veins.

And Miss Carden curtseyed with a smooth ease that floated the circling frills on her muslin frock—spotted with sprays of heartsease—as though a zephyr had moved them. She did not lift the latch of the oaken wicket; she left the man to look along the path that he had walked by a magic moonlight, but which, so it seemed, was to be closed to his feet now that the sun shone. She made no other answer to his salutation and announcement.

He had time to look at her, whilst he felt a stammer shambling along to mutilate his next words. The soft light of the candles that had been a dream-radiance about her had not shown

him the ripe beauty that the sun now disclosed. Julia Carden was of that sort that the sunshine cannot shame by revealing flaws that escape the lesser lights. Her beauty had that colour and texture and perfect symmetry which the day makes glorious. And her eyes—he saw them at last fixed coolly upon him—were grey, or rather blue-grey, shadowed by long lashes; there was the shimmer of steel in them, and, he thought, something of its hardness. "I—I believe you are Miss Carden," he said.

"I am," she replied with commonplace precision. It was a lame beginning to a love assault. The lady had advanced from the silence of a curtsey to the curtness of monosyllables, a mere safety move that avoided the discourtesy of a retreat. The word was still with the man. He accepted the position. "I am Mr. Barrow, of Sheepdene."

"My aunt is at home." She lifted the latch, and with another bow that covered up a lack of words he accepted the invitation and stood with her upon the same side of the gate. He was still looking into the grey eyes, chagrined that they neither softened nor refused to meet his. Had he looked lower he would have seen that the bosom was far less steady and was signalling inward

agitation. His own brain buzzed with the words he wanted to say, yet he stood, almost touching her, whilst one might have counted a slow twenty, staring and dumb. Her eyes were beautiful, and his own—dark and liquid—softened, she noting all and he unconscious of the change. An added tinge of pink floated into her cheeks, but he was too obsessed with shades of grey to notice it. Her hand moved to the high-placed waist of her dress because her heart was throbbing; he thought she sought to know whether a red rose was still safely there. "We are neighbours," he said.

"Nearly," she answered.

He glanced at the water. "The stream is between us," he added, and did not like the omen; yet it gave him the chance to lead up to his purpose. "Isn't there a superstition about running water?"

"And witches?" she queried.

"Yes."

"Yes," she affirmed.

"I did not cross it that night!"

"No?" She raised perfectly pencilled brows to emphasize her question.

"One might think I had done so," he mused. The lashes came down over the eyes at last, and she felt the rose again. His glance came back

swiftly enough to surprise her. "You remember," he said, bending, and lowering his voice.

"What?" she asked.

"I came to you on Midsummer Eve."

She hesitated, took the flower from her waist, pressed the petals apart with her fingers, then put it back again. She refused to shield herself by any denial. "Someone came," she answered lightly.

"It was I. You haven't forgotten?"

She looked up. "I saw no one."

"No—of course not—that was part of the play."

She was woman enough to equivocate, and did so by echoing in a tone of blank inquiry—"Play?"

"I answered your call in the churchyard. Fate willed it so, for I had no thought of being there at such an hour. I followed you here, ate your supper, pledged you in wine where the rosemary had been dipped. And I left you a token. I ought to have redeemed it by next daylight. I did not. I am a stranger and did not fully understand. But I am here now, pulled hither by something that is stronger than my will." He spoke rapidly, and throwing wide his arms, exclaimed: "I will acknowledge your claim, Miss Carden!"

For answer he got a laugh—low, rippling, musical—and his ears were too dulled by the

tumult of his thoughts to detect that its gaiety was forced. The next instant she was all charming contrition. "Forgive me, Mr. Barrow; you said you were a stranger. You have taken a harmless bit of folly too seriously. It was a mere escapade on my part and had better be forgotten. I am glad you did not answer your cue and so come into the comedy again before the almanac called down the curtain."

"And the rosemary leaf?"

"Have you kept yours?"

Truth was amongst Jasper's virtues. He answered shamefacedly, "I threw it away—in ignorance."

Julia laughed lightly, although a little lump of cold disappointment dropped like a weight into her heart. "Never mind," she said, "you broke the spell in any case—that is if any spell was woven. Now, shall we shake hands? And do come and see my aunt; she will be delighted to meet you, for she has whole volumes of gossip to relate, and you, a stranger come to be a neighbour, will be a specially suitable victim for her stories."

Jasper accepted the proffered hand, which was as firm as his own and cooler. Together they walked the flagged pathway which he now remembered so acutely. At the open door the

young lady paused. "Do you know," she said, "I saw you once riding down the lane from Swainswick Church."

"Did you!" he exclaimed eagerly. "When?"

"On Midsummer Afternoon; but you did not see me!"

"No-o," he said thoughtfully. But he remembered he had seen Sophie Watkin. They entered the wide doorway side by side.

CHAPTER XIII

FORTUNE TURNS AN UNEXPECTED CORNER

JASPER BARROW had half-an-hour of the company and conversation of Miss Selina Trotter, and during that time—with the exception of a first few minutes devoted to questions concerning his health and prospects—he was reduced to almost casual monosyllabic exclamations. When at last he stood outside the house he marvelled at the amount of information concerning everybody and everything that had been conveyed to him. Miss Trotter had sharp eyes and quick ears, and for half a century she had been using both in a circumscribed valley whose bottom was not much more than a mile from the tops of its eastern and western ramparts of hills. Questions over, the niece had betaken herself to the garden, and Jasper only caught fleeting glimpses of her busy amongst the flowers.

Miss Trotter was a silver-haired old lady, plump and petite in figure, with a face as fresh and rosy

as a child. Her gold-rimmed spectacles, crinoline, and the bands of dainty frills around her frock made her look curiously like a nice conditioned little girl dressed up to play the part of grandmother. But her caustic tongue and the expression of her views upon the lives of her neighbours quickly dispelled this illusion. Jasper wondered what sort of scarecrow he would appear if once she set to work in earnest to tear the fine clothes of his respectability. Julia had warned him to say nothing of their midnight adventure; after five minutes of the aunt he had not the slightest desire to do so.

She was one who had known his mother from the day of her birth, and had, maybe, understood the wayward girl better than any one else. "She did a mad thing, Mr. Barrow, and it was bound to end in disaster; you have come up out of the wreckage, but I am not going to say that your existence redeems the mistake. Your mother followed the dictates of her heart and her temper, two most unsafe guides. Had she been strong enough to make your father live with her here under the shelter of a sound roof things might have turned out differently, even happily; but to go a-wandering along highways and by-ways after the fashion of outlandish heathen was simple

madness. No, don't contradict me" (Jasper had essayed to speak). "You must know what your mother *was* as well as what she *became* before you can judge how she suffered. Take an old woman's advice—you will need it if ever a man did—don't follow your heart, make your heart follow your will, and remember that the light of every day common-sense is the best lantern to walk by. Because you are in love is no reason why you should marry!"

"No?" questioned Jasper somewhat amazedly.

"Certainly not," was the emphatic rejoinder. "In my young days I fell in love several times and on two occasions rather badly. But I had a practical little head that would insist upon keeping cool even when my heart was at its hottest. So here I am, a happy old woman when I might have been buried as one of at least half-a-dozen disappointed wives."

"Yes," exclaimed Jasper, not knowing what else to say.

"Of course," Miss Trotter pursued, smiling genially from her child-like, be-spectacled eyes, "I don't mean you must not marry."

"No," said Jasper.

"You must!"

"Yes," he agreed.

"Your mother's family was a very old one. Have you thought of adopting their name?"

"No."

"Dear me!"

Jasper felt guilty of some crime of ignorance. The little figure in the high-backed elbow-chair was watching him, "sizing him up," as Mr. Gosling expressed it, and he had a curious sensation of growing physically smaller. His hostess relieved the tension. "Is your father still alive?"

"Yes, and I would like you to believe, Miss Trotter, that my mother's unhappiness was not due to him; it was our life that made her wretched."

"Yes?"

"It must surely go to the credit of my father that he allowed me to be brought up in my mother's way. I am his only child, and yet I have been trained in a fashion that might make me hate the tents of my people."

"You don't hate them?"

"No."

"You may even go back to them?"

"Yes"—he paused—"for my mother's reason."

"For a wife?"

"For lack of love; or because of anger against the people here. I don't look a son of these hills, Miss Trotter."

The old lady adjusted her glasses. "You are very like your father when he was your age and haunted these woods; only there is an English stamp about you which, of course, he never had. I think I shall like you."

"You are very kind."

"You must come to me for advice. I have offered advice to everybody around here over and over again. As one standing aside I see their follies and warn them, but the silly things won't heed and rush into the very dangers I tell them to avoid. Now your worst troubles will begin when you set out to find a wife."

"But——"

"I don't think you will hesitate long before you make a beginning. Now take my niece——"

"Yes——"

"By that I mean, Mr. Barrow, that *I* will take my niece as an example of what to avoid. She is very good-looking."

"Perfectly beautiful!" murmured Jasper absently, and the keen old eyes turned sharply upon him.

Miss Trotter went on to illustrate her "bad example." "You have seen Miss Carden, and, of course, she has impressed you rather favourably. That is only natural, for she is really quite nice-

looking. But she is hopelessly unpractical, with a rather shapely head full of dreams and whimsies. Yours, I should say, is stuffed up with plenty of the same feathery material. Am I right?"

Jasper smiled a little ruefully. "I really don't know," he answered.

"Very well then," she added briskly, "you must sit at home and examine yourself very thoroughly before you set out on your quest for a mistress for Sheepdene. Now, when you take a wife—I am always telling deaf young people this—you should look for one who possesses what you lack—for the 'other half,' in fact. If you marry otherwise you will hobble through life with two boots for the same foot, a very halting and painful sort of 'Pilgrim's Progress.'" Miss Trotter leaned forward from her chair. "Now I do hope, Mr. Barrow, that I shall find you wise enough to listen to those who have seen two generations of rather silly people blunder through a world they never understood. You don't mind me speaking so plainly at the beginning of our acquaintance, do you?"

"It is really very kind, but——"

"Don't let us have any 'buts' until you have thought over all I have said. And you must forgive an old woman for talking so much. I am

very pleased to see you." She held out her hand, and Jasper rose and took it. "Good-bye, Mr. Barrow, I am nearly always at home now; run in for a chat whenever you like."

Barrow took his departure. He lingered a little by the door, and a little longer by the gate, but the midsummer maiden stayed amongst her flowers. Feeling that a more extended view of the valley might lead to a fuller appreciation of Miss Trotter's wisdom, he swung off uphill towards Swainswick, the deep lane and its towering hedges of beech and oak, elder and hazel, affording him a road as cool and shady as heart could wish. Tiny blue bird's-eyes peeped from the bank, foxgloves stood up stately amongst the tall grasses, and the little red globes of ripe wild strawberries were like rubies amongst the green. At the turn in the lane he caught the breeze that came up from the southern end of the valley, and he stood for a minute or two to enjoy it and peep through a gap into Miss Trotter's garden.

It is impossible to be an intelligent nomad and yet avoid becoming a humourist; such an one sees a thousand facets of a kaleidoscopic world, and almost the sum total of human foibles is known to him. Pinches, pricks, and blows gotten in the hurly-burly may develop a sardonic acid in his

humour, but it is there; the arm-chair philosopher may become a curmudgeon, but the sins that arise from mental dyspepsia rarely or never trouble the free rover. Jasper had a goodly share of mankind's saving grace, and could laugh from the eyes and never a twitch of the lips. He stood long enough at the gap for the events of the afternoon to shake down into right position and proportion, and an imp of amusement with a sting in his tail was the ultimate figure. Had he been in love he might have found himself nursing Cupid, dolorous and weeping with many a wound for the hands of Old Surgeon Time.

After a week of struggling with the momentous questions, "Shall I go down to her?" or "Shall I forbear?" he had ventured down-hill, taking himself, and all that he had and hoped for, as a chivalrous offering to a lady whose unspoken claim he was prepared to acknowledge. The gravity of the business had stirred him profoundly, and his physical heart had not yet settled down out of the turmoil into a steady rhythm. A man —especially one who is young and ardent—may feel himself a hero without being a prig; he may suffer from emotional heroics and not spout rodomontade. Jasper had had an attack. And she who should have fanned the fires and warmed

herself thereat had quietly scattered the embers and puffed them out; quiet little puffs they were, and the hero's conceit of himself was suffering from chill. Miss Trotter had played upon him with a broad jet of cold water.

Barrow was very human, crudely so in some respects, and the primitive male ran strong in him; fortunately, a chequered life and breeding had taught him philosophy and salted him with humour. He was sore—very sore, but sardonic salt is a good thing rubbed into wounds such as his; he smarted, but there was no fever; and he mused by the gap and let the south wind play with him long enough to bring a twinkle into his eye. He laughed; true, there was more grimness than mirth in it; yet it was a real laugh that came from his lips as he turned once more towards the distant spire of Swainswick Church rising from the higher slopes of the hill.

As he walked along the mists drifted clean away from Jasper's vision of Julia Carden. He had chased a white-robed unknown under the glamour of moonlight and superstition; that was one phase, and he had played round it in his dreams. Now he had stood beside her in the sharp light of day, finding her a warm, breathing, beautiful reality; he had heard her voice—it was still ringing in his

ears—and he liked the music; her eyes were grey, fearless yet thoughtful; there had been no melting tenderness in them, but then, he himself was not in love; they had challenged, a much more potent charm for the primitive in Jasper. The maid was intensely vital, perfect in every outward semblance of the essential feminine. To a man who had offered himself from such motives as his her appeal was irresistible. In a way she was fleeing again, daring him to a new love-chase. He resolved to follow. There was a spring in his step and a light in his eyes that caused Dicky Babs to stare after him when he passed him in one of the avenues of yews that led through the churchyard.

CHAPTER XIV

BROWN EYES

JIM WATKIN was smoking the pipe of ease when Jasper came out of the churchyard gate, and the rotund placidity of the innkeeper tempted the disturbed young gentleman across the road for a chat. Jim pulled the pipe from his mouth and tugged the brim of his hat by way of salutation. "Just thinking about you, sir," he said.

"Oh!" exclaimed Jasper; "wanting to see me?"

"Not about anything particular, sir; ther' was a thought or two buzzin'."

"Yes."

"But I doan't know as they be worth tellin' 'tis like that wi' thoughts at times. Steppin' inside, sir?"

"Yes. How's Miss Sophie?"

Jim rubbed his chin reflectively. "Only so-so; don't seem quite lively these last few days."

"Ah!" said Jasper, and stepped in out of the sunshine. Both turned into the cool parlour,

with its roomy chairs stuffed with horsehair. Everything showed the clean and tasty housewifery of Sophie. The "Yew Tree" was a good inn, and Watkin a man in very decent circumstances. His only child would be a bargain in the marriage market for other things besides her beauty and cheery disposition. Fresh from an encounter with another maiden these matters came sharply into Jasper's mind. He hoped Sophie would get an excellent husband; she was a dear little soul and deserved so much.

Watkin broke in upon these quick thoughts. "What would you like to take, sir?"

"Whatever is coolest."

"Drop of old cider from the bottom of the cellar?"

"That will do splendidly; bring a cup for yourself."

"Thank 'ee!" Jim went for the liquor. Jasper strolled to the window and looked out. He almost faced the spot where he had jumped the churchyard wall on a memorable occasion, and he recognized the particular yew tree behind which he had hidden. He felt now that the events of that night were going to dominate his life in so far as it might be lived in a settled community. His eye roved along the church wall until it came to

the sexton's cottage by the western gate. The tall figure of Adam Stone came up through the low doorway. The man stood staring across the road, his gaze fixed upon the inn. With the sun full upon him it was easy to see the dropped corners of the mouth and the heavy shadows under his deep-set eyes. It was the figure of a strong, rude, but emotional man who took life hard. Adam Stone was made of fine clay and not ungenerously moulded; a big, untutored nature, whose sensitive edges were ready to wilt and warp at a touch; the sort of man who might without radical alteration of his ego die as saint, or hero, or murderer. No woman could be wholly blessed who awakened the love of such as he. To her he would give all—body, soul, time; from her he would exact all these to the uttermost; she would taste heaven and hell, but no midway paradise of soft and dreamless ease in his strong arms. Husbands of the Adam Stone type have taught cynical grandams to advise pretty maids to marry fools—and rule them.

The stonemason moved across the road. Watkin came into the parlour with the two cups of cool cider, and presently Adam's heavy step was heard going through to the ale kitchen behind. Watkin put down his cup. "Sounds like sexton," he said.

"It is," replied Jasper.

"Then I'll go and serve 'un; doan't know as Sophie wants to see 'un." Watkin vanished. Jasper stood sipping his cider and thinking of the little maid's love affair as he conceived it. Watkin came back. "Rum chap is Adam," he said, and took a deep draught from the cider cup.

"Moody," commented Jasper.

"And too silent," added Watkin; "sits too long cheek by jowl with his own thoughts. And he have altered a lot; got bitterer." The landlord took another drink and glanced quickly at the young squire. The latter caught the look. "Bad tempered?" he asked.

"Never knowed 'un hurt a fly," replied Watkin hastily, then added slowly, "but ther', until lately I never knowed 'un say an unkind word."

"And now?"

"Well, 'tis different." Watkin filled his pipe; Jasper followed suit. Sophie's light footstep sounded overhead, and the father listened.

"I think Adam have tried to come to an understanding wi' Sophie, and failed."

"Sophie is too good for him; too cheery, too pretty; a mate fit for his masters!" Jasper spoke emphatically. With true upland independence Watkin resented the tone a little. "Sexton's a

good man, and as true as the steel in his own chisels," he said. "What's more, he worships the ground the maid walks upon. At one time she liked 'un well enough, but something's gone wrong. Night after night he comes across and sits for hours over a quart, his ears a-listenin' and his eyes watchin' the doorways. I doan't like it."

"Not a cheerful customer," said Jasper indifferently.

There was a pause, both men listening to the slow but very light footfalls in the room above. Dicky Babs toddled across the road and Watkin remarked upon it. The gentleman made no answer; he was not interested. Watkin cleared his throat. "Not that it would worry you at all, sir," he exclaimed apropos of nothing apparent.

"What?" asked Jasper.

"Sexton never liked you; spoke bitter about you, sir, when he heard you were coming into the valley."

"Oh!" exclaimed Jasper, suddenly recalling the scowling face of Stone as he stood between the elders in the early morning of Midsummer Day. He laughed. "The sexton's interest is quite flattering!"

"Of course, it's nothing to you, sir. You be a

gentleman and he is just Adam," said the innkeeper apologetically; "but it worries us a bit seeing as we be all so neighbourly together. I suppose you wouldn't just have a bit of a talk wi' Adam?"

"Why, Watkin?"

"Well, sir, just to be easy and friendly with him and show ther's no ill-feeling on your side."

Jasper looked hard at his companion. "Why should I care a straw about the fellow's opinion?"

"You shouldn't, sir; he's beneath you; but we likes Adam, and—and it seems a pity."

"But you put his ill-humour down to Sophie's rejection of him."

"Partly, sir. I doan't like to see the man's eyes glowerin' and hungerin' after my little girl and she wi' no great fancy for 'un. But his bridling up at the sound of your name came afore that, and it have kept on. I doan't understand it, and it makes I uneasy."

"But why? If the fellow's a bad tempered dog let him snarl. He won't bite."

Watkin shook his head. "I'm not so sure. I knew one of his sort years ago, and he bit; ay, and t'other man died of the biting."

Jasper faced the innkeeper swiftly and squarely. "Better not speak in riddles, Watkin."

"I won't. Adam's mad in love, and mad wi' jealousy. You're taking notice of my daughter, and I doan't say as 'tisn't an honour; I understand. Adam doan't, that's all."

"And his stupidity is hurting Miss Sophie. Very well, I'll have him over to Sheepdene. There's a month's work for a mason on the house and buildings."

Dicky Babs's little form had perched itself upon the ale bench, and Watkin went out to him. Jasper finished his cider and then turned to do his business with Adam whilst the latter was alone. Coming into the passage he espied Sophie at the far end, and the flush of recognition that overspread her pretty face, and the wistful welcoming of the brown eyes, carried him beyond the room where Adam was. The vision of a dainty figure in a spotted blue dress, muslin apron, and buckled shoes, the whole crowned by a frilled cap and blue ribbons, banished the dusty ghost of the stonemason, although the two were so intimately connected. A few strides brought Jasper to her side, his hand outstretched in greeting. "Well, this is a pleasure I did not expect," he cried; "how do you do, Miss Sophie?"

The maiden was radiant, and said she did "very well indeed!" If her looks at that moment were

any warrant, her words could be nothing but true. Without releasing her hand from Barrow's she bubbled out questions concerning himself and Sheepdene, gran'feyther and old Jane; and he, holding the little fingers, somewhat roughened with housework, replied merrily to them all. Adam sat and heard and ground his heels with fury into the sand of the floor. A lover cannot mistake the ring of happiness in a beloved voice, and Sophie's pealed bells. She had a rush basket on her arm. "Going into the garden?" asked Jasper.

"Yes, to gather peas."

"Very well, then, I will go with you; we can pick and chatter."

Sophie uttered no protest as she had done on a former occasion, but flashed her delight into his eyes. They crossed the yard and entered the wicket that led to the garden. Adam, his face working and livid, watched them from the window, Sophie's merry laughter as they squeezed through the gate together lashing him almost to madness. He gulped down the ale and strode by the back way from the house. What a light had sprung into eyes that had only frowns for him; and what music into the voice that his presence stilled to dumbness! How could he doubt

any longer? And yet the suddenness with which her heart had gone out to the uncanny stranger perplexed him. Adam dwelt on the borderland of tombs and funereal yews amongst superstitious hills. To him the dark-visaged gipsy gentleman suddenly became an unholy thing, something to be fought and quelled. He shut himself in his cottage and watched the inn from a window.

Sophie's deft fingers could have picked from the well-hung vines in ten minutes all the peas she wanted. With another pair of hands to help her the task was spread over more than half-an-hour; and then began a plucking of the flowers that were breathing their fragrance into the evening air. Sophie's little body trembled with happiness when she passed through the wicket again. And her artless questions concerning Jasper's household had led her into a promise to come to Sheepdene and put her wise little housewife's head alongside the grey one of Jane Gosling to plan what could be done for the comfort of its master.

Jasper remembered the stonemason when he reached the house, and he looked into the ale kitchen to find that his man was gone. He bade Sophie "good-evening" and passed through the house, pausing at the door to consider whether he should go across to the sexton's cottage or not.

He decided there was no hurry as his men were all busy, so he turned up the street and towards the highroad running north, from which a lane dipped into the valley running to Sheepdene and joining the lower way by which he had come.

Evening had fallen, the sun was gone, and the sunset lay behind the Beacon flooding with crimson the horizon beyond the wide vale of the Severn. The air had the stillness of a deep, motionless pool, and the magic quietude, the softening light, the dozing valley, with its sloping fields and hanging woods, awoke the vagabond in Jasper. Sheepdene House would be a prison at such an hour. He wanted to be up, up and beyond it all, with vast spaces spread at his feet. The little valley suddenly became a toy landscape. He wanted to see the rugged hills and mountains that lay thirty, forty, fifty miles away clear-cut as cameos against the evening sky. He forsook the road and turned up to the camp that was in every sense the crown of the Beacon. There he might fill his lungs and feast his eyes, letting his thoughts run free in a search for dreams and inspiration. He knew he would have the hilltop to himself, for the toil-wearied folk of Swainswick were not given to climbing at the end of a long summer's day of labour.

. . . . . .

Adam Stone went back to the inn by the way along which he had left it. He had cooled himself into a resolve to make one more appeal to Sophie. He reached the yard gate where the witch-guarding elders stood, their strong-scented blossom gone and the green fruit hanging in clusters. A sound of singing came to his ears, the meditative carolling of a light voice, fluty as that of a bird and with the happiness of nesting time. Sophie was singing to herself as she shelled the peas that other hands had helped to gather. Adam knew the words:

My true love hath my heart and I have his,
By just exchange one to the other given;
I hold his dear, and mine he cannot miss,
There never was a fairer bargain driven.
My true love hath my heart and I have his!

The music was a pretty madrigal setting, one of a set of part songs that the church choir had learned under the bâton of the schoolmaster during the previous winter. The big stonemason had trumpeted the bass at the practices—softly let it be said—so that he might catch the sweet notes of Sophie, whose place was always immediately in front of him in the choral class. Now those same notes were hammers crumbling his hopes into ruinous fragments. Her voice had been silent for days that had seemed as long as years. But now

she sang again to tell her own soul that her heart was given. Adam stole along on tiptoe and peeped in. Sophie's face was radiant. With a choke in his throat he stumbled away and reached the street, feeling that his big heart—that strange thing that he did not understand—was broken.

He, too, turned his steps towards the open country, for he wanted air to breathe, and a loneliness to fit his desolation. The twilight seemed alive with mocking visions of the girl he loved. He saw her as she appeared when first her daintiness and the flowerlike purity of her maidenhood struck home to his empty heart. Sophie at sixteen had suddenly budded full with the rich promise of womanhood. For four years Adam had worshipped. Ten thousand times had he looked love out of his grave eyes; once only had his lips spoken it. He shivered at the memory of what he had said in those few moments of jealous passion. He saw the maid he loved wincing from his cruel words as though from the sting of a whip lash; the flood of hot colour leaped to her face once more; her head bowed in shame—not shame for herself, but for him who thought so meanly and spoke so wantonly. He had repented his words every moment that he had lived since that time; and evening after evening he had come over to speak

the words of remorse that drummed through his brain. That night he had vowed that he would crave her pardon and pity even upon his knees. And he found her with not even a thought for him and singing her happy surrender to another. "God! what torments I do suffer!" he groaned.

He passed the last cottage and paused for a brief while staring half-vacantly along the ledge-like highway that divided the last upward swell of the hill from the park-like drop of the valley to the level of the stream below. Whither should he go? Wander on in a blind line driven by thought? Like Barrow he turned up over the green turf to find some spot where nothing but the sky stood above him.

With lowered head he climbed on until he reached the foot of the Beacon tump. Raising his eyes he saw the solitary figure of Jasper standing black on the topmost point. Hatred of the man flamed up in him. What right had he in Swainswick? Why should he stand alone, aggressive and dominating, on the sky line? Was he to be the shapely mark towards which all maiden eyes should turn to the dwarfing of other men? Adam stood and cursed him; then went swiftly on.

His enemy's back was towards him. Grimly he

thought of how he would make him turn his face, and how the dark visage should whiten. The stonemason was Herculean in height and compact of brawn and sinew. He knew the strength of his own thews and gloried in it; in his rough, shy, romantic way he had dreamed how it would appeal to the shapely maid of the inn. If she would not love him for it, then she should come to dread him because of it.

He strode on. Jasper, tired of standing, threw himself full length on the short grass, still looking out on the Severn valley intent upon his own dreams. Adam came to the green wall before the first trench. He stepped up and stood upon its smooth floor. The man above neither heard nor saw. He climbed the next escarpment and the next, and was in the camp circle of the age-old fortification. Before him were shallow, quarried hollows and grass-grown mounds where mouldered heaps of the shaling stone that had roofed the village below. Over the soundless sward he strode and stood almost upon the heels of the dreaming Jasper. He followed the line of his head to see what he saw. Before him were the green, outflung hills that broke the fall to the valley and the city; away to the north the bold, serrated edge of the Worcestershire heights shut in the horizon. Sweep-

ing south by west was the climbing smudge of the great forest that had its feet washed by the Severn, whose great bend was now aglow with the last fires of the sunset. Beyond were the hills of Hereford and Monmouth, and behind all, like a cloud shape in the far sky, was the dim line of those Welsh beacons that towered nearly three times the height of that upon which he stood. It was a landscape that could put a spell upon a man who was nursing murder in his heart.

Adam stooped to Jasper and touched him on the shoulder.

CHAPTER XV

THE FIGHT

A REVERIE too deep to be disturbed by ordinary sounds may be startingly broken by a light touch. In one quick movement Jasper swung himself round and into an upright standing position. The velocity and ease of this evolution made its impress upon the mind of the heavily built stonemason; it was like a flash, and dazzled him so that the other got the chance of the first word. "What the devil——"

"That's the word, Mr. Barrow; think o' the devil and you find 'un at your elbow. You were thinkin' of me!"

Jasper shrugged with irritation. "My good fellow, you flatter yourself; my thoughts were as far from you as possible."

"On a woman then." Adam thrust his face a little forward. "On a woman; I was bound to be right in two guesses." There was a grimness in the freckled, sunburned face that commanded the respect of an answer.

"What business of yours can it be if they were about a woman?" was the hot reply; for a lover resents the breaking of a dream.

"That's just what we'm goin' to talk about," commented the other with exasperating slowness; "just what we'm goin' to talk about—you and me. And after the talk"—Adam licked his dry lips—"summ'at else!"

Jasper looked critically at his man. The eyes were duller and heavier than when they had flashed hatred and challenge at him on the early mid-summer morn, but they carried the same message. He recalled the words of Watkin, spoken an hour or so before, and realized the error into which blind jealousy had led his challenger. And the fellow was a moody, dull-witted yokel. Barrow laughed the hard, metallic laugh with which he jeered at an unsympathetic world. "You're a fool," he said

"Maybe," answered Adam.

"And if you want part of the hilltop there's plenty of room elsewhere. Get away!"

"I want you, Mr. Barrow, and I have come for you. Ther's a matter between us that has got to be settled here and now; waitin' will only worsen it."

Jasper sat down on the top of the rim of the

camp hollow. "Get on with what you have to say, then, and be quick about it." Adam was standing a little way down the inner slope so that his head was practically on a level with Barrow's. He looked hurriedly all round. "We'm alone, and none can get to us in a hurry; 'twill do!" His eyes sought those of the man he held to be his rival. The gipsy face became inscrutable. Jasper, with the eastern impassiveness that was part of his inheritance, put his soul behind a mask that it was impossible for his antagonist to penetrate. He sat there seemingly careless and indifferent; in reality the slim, sinewy body was tightened like a steel spring for sudden movement.

Adam planted his feet a little more firmly on the slope and faced his man, resolute purpose in the big straight mouth and square-cut jaws. The gentlemanly ease of the man he had chosen to make his adversary annoyed him, it looked so like contempt. Once more he moistened the lips that the fever of his passion was continually drying. "Why did you come to Swainswick?" he burst out.

Jasper's white teeth showed in a smile; the answer cut the questioner to the quick. "I came home," he said quietly. The big man winced. Where was his home, the house of his people? His heavy fist clenched, but he straightened the

fingers; *that* time was not yet come. There was a pause; the one man sitting on the rampart rim with an easy nonchalance, the other staring into the darkening west as though for a gift of tongues out of its paling fires. Coming up the hill his thoughts had run in a riot of fierce words; now he stood almost dumb. Bitterly his own heart cursed his slowness.

"Why have you made love to *her?*"

"To whom?" The slight uplift of the dark eyebrows cause the dusty fist to clench again.

"You know who I do mean," he said harshly; "there is only one woman."

Jasper moved just a little, smiled just a little; gipsy blood-lust was getting the better of gipsy indifference. "You must speak more plainly, Mr. Stone."

"You have come here with your flash circus ways and your devil-dark face and robbed me of the girl I'd die for."

"Which girl?" Adam's words were insolent, but Barrow had himself well in hand. "Which girl?" he repeated.

"God! do 'ee want me to speak her name?"

"You must. I shall feel more interest in this ridiculous quarrel you are forcing upon me if I know whom it is about."

"You were with her this evening in the garden, whisperin' as the devil did to Eve; you be after her white soul just as he was."

"Sophie!" said Barrow softly.

The name came sibilantly, caressingly, and with such apparent familiarity from the lips that Adam was stung to a frenzy. "Curse you!" he roared, "curse you! speakin' of her like that. Do you deny now? What do you want wi' her except to soil her and break her heart? Why have you robbed me who love her so?"

Barrow stood up. "My man, it is you who wrong a dear friend of mine. Who are you to talk of being robbed? Was she ever yours? Do you think a gentleman has less care of a maid's honour than a clown has?"

"I love her."

"The whole of mankind is free to do that."

"No; she be ours!"

Jasper laughed again the laugh that jeered and mocked. "You fool! a pretty wench is the world's prize."

"She be ours; leave her to us; go to your own women. Such as you be use our maids and throw 'em away. We cherish 'em. You laugh at 'em in the end; we pray wi' 'em, ay, and pray to 'em. You *shall* swear to leave her alone or, as God's

in heaven, I'll kill 'ee!" The toil-hardened hands were thrust out as though they would clasp Jasper's throat and crush the breath out of it, and they quivered in the violence of passion. Thoughts flashed through his mind. These silent hill men were like elemental forces. Well, there is enough and to spare of the elemental in the gipsy, and Jasper had hill blood also. He had made no love to Sophie and had no thoughts of doing so. But it would be waste of breath and—so he thought—of dignity also to attempt to reason with the stonemason. A fight was inevitable; the sun had gone and the night cloud was stealing up with a puffy wind out of the west. The great arena stood empty at their feet. And the sweet person of Sophie was worth a blow. Jasper looked his challenger in the eyes. "I shall go my own ways in Swainswick without interference from you or any such as you," he said.

Adam dropped his hands. "We shall see," he replied, a sudden and ominous calmness in his voice. He tossed aside cap, cravat, and coat. "I could go down to the quarry and bring up weapons," he went on, "but I'll settle with 'ee wi' them as God gave me. 'Tis the feel of my hands upon 'ee that I do crave for." Jasper had not moved. Adam looked up at him. "I doan't want to

take 'ee at any disadvantage; if you'm a man—strip!"

Quite leisurely Jasper made ready. He would rather fight Adam exasperated than Adam calm. The latter waited. "I be the bigger and better man," he said. "I'll stand whilst you have first blow."

Jasper turned in surprise. "No," he answered.

Calmness had brought back words to the stonemason. "This fight be between us two."

Jasper smiled. "There will certainly be no backers to make a ring."

Adam nodded. "I want to make my meanin' plain. No one but us two will know anything about it. Whichever of us walks down this hill tonight will keep silence. One will be left. T'other 'un mustn't help 'un or send help to 'un. If he can anyhow get down, well and good; if not, let 'un bide. 'Tis for her sake, for she'd hate the one that lived. Do 'ee agree?"

"I agree," answered Jasper.

"And you won't take first blow?"

"I'll take nothing that my hands cannot win for me."

"Well, I like 'ee for that, but it won't lead me to spare 'ee. Be you ready?"

"Quite!"

The soft light of evening that comes dreaming down when no direct arrow from the sun pierces the air was brooding over the lonely hilltop with a peace that appealed even to the hearts of the dumb creation when the two antagonists faced for the conflict. Each took a last swift measurement of the other, and each realized possibilities not clearly apparent before. To Jasper, the stonemason stripped was less bulky and cumbersome than he had imagined, whilst Adam recognized that the well-cut coat of the master of Sheepdene was not responsible for the straight trimness of his figure; in size he lost but little, and the doubled fists showed unexpected sinew and muscle in the bared arms. They promised a more effective blow than Stone had imagined, and he had not forgotten the uncanny ease and grace of his swift upward movement from the turf. He glanced at the dark face; the smile had gone, the lips were tight shut, the coal-black eyes hard and piercing. Sol Gosling was right; they bored through a man.

Jasper was the cooler of the two. The fires of a big passion were already burning in the heart of the coarser and ruder man, parching his throat, drying his lips, and breathing in hot gusts through his distended nostrils. His deep shoulders, long arm, and the bony fist accustomed to the grip of a ham-

mer, were capable of being the ministers of a death blow; yet he had never struck a man in anger. The other—in gypsy camp and school playground—had fought a score of hot battles. The laurels of victory were on the immobile knees of the gods who watch the homeric combats of man.

Athirst for vengeance, Adam aimed the first blow, only to find that empty air displaced the face he longed to disfigure. He wheeled in time to defend himself from a counter stroke, but the miss unsteadied him a little. Feigning with the right, he hit out with his left where he expected the dodging head would be. Jasper had anticipated so elementary a move and had stepped the other way; quick as a thought he lunged in with a blow on the side of the neck that sent Adam's head rocking, and when the latter came round with a windmill swing only empty air once more met his clenched hands. He turned again and rushed, only to be pulled up by a body blow that was strong enough to stop him. It was maddening not to be able to touch the dancing figure, that seemed as elusive as the twilight that enwrapped it. The blows, full-armed as they had been, mattered little, and Jasper realized that he must reach a critical spot if his opponent was to be sent to earth.

For a few seconds both stood on the defensive;

then Jasper began to manœuvre in the hope of forcing Adam to more uneven ground, where quick feet might work as advantageously as quick fists. But the stonemason knew his own weakness already and refused to be moved. He swung slowly on his heels, watched his chance, sprang forward, and got in a blow that staggered Barrow. The deep "Ah!" from Adam's throat spoke a whole song of exultation; he had got "home," and what he had accomplished once, he could do again. But Jasper was only warned, not baffled. He moved quicker, feinted to come in, brought his man out, and crashed two swift blows into his face that made him thrust his arms wildly up and so expose his body to another lunge that sent him stumbling against a little hillock. With a thrust of his heel he steadied himself, dashed forward—a curse on his lips—and jabbed, swung, and punched at the swaying, dipping, dancing body of his foe. Some of his wild blows got home and left their marks in bruise and blood, but his own mouth, eyes, and ribs were targets for what seemed a whole battery of assailing hands. He backed from the onslaught, half-dazed, and seeking only to get a clear vision and a breathing time. His hope—even his boast to himself—had been that he would smash his adversary by some fierce blow

that should have all his strength and hate, all his love for Sophie embodied in it as destroying forces. That blow had not been given by his quivering arm. Right, of course, was his, but the devil is strong and cunning, his black eyes burned and saw better than Adam's in the rapidly falling darkness.

The two stood about two yards apart, Jasper wiping blood from a cut in his cheek, and Adam, his arms hanging loose, pressing a hot tongue tenderly against loosened teeth and bleeding lips and wondering at the pain in his eyes and the streaks that floated in the air when he moved them. Save for his own heavy breathing there was dead silence, and he found himself wishing that his enemy would speak. He had said nothing, uttered no cry since the "quite!" that had signalled his readiness for the fray.

Suddenly he stiffened his body, and with a gasp of prayer on his swollen lips rushed for Jasper, resolved to grip with him, crush him, batter out of him the oath that he had sworn he should take. The wild spasm of onslaught almost succeeded. Blow after blow he delivered, taking as many in return, yet scarcely heeding them. He followed his quick-footed adversary round and round, grunting, gasping, seeking the hold that he wanted

upon his body. He obtained it, and then ensued a fierce tugging and straining, Adam only hoping to crush by the sheer strength of his arms, Jasper seeking to throw his adversary. Now and again an arm was loosened to deliver a blow, then the grip tightened again and the two swayed and heaved, lurched and stumbled, tripping on stones and hillocks, and only recovering a firm footing by a great effort. The baffling of his purpose excited the sexton's frenzy, and the punishment he had received added to his madness. Murder, stark and unashamed, sprang up in his heart. He began to move his arms upwards along Jasper's body in an attempt to get at his opponent's throat. The grin on the big mouth, the glare in the eyes, which Jasper could just discern in the gathering darkness, warned him. He kept the big arms down, tried to lift the heavy body and throw it. He strained and heaved until the threat of failing strength put him again on the defensive. There was no wriggling from the terrible bear clutch that held him. Adam was trying to force the upper part of his body backwards. For a moment he yielded to the pressure, then, suddenly recovering himself and locking a leg round the other's, he sent him down.

But the fall broke his own hold partially and he rolled on his side. Adam seized a flat stone, and too

maddened to think any longer of fair fighting, jabbed at Jasper's face. His half-blinded eyes and the bad light misled him. He missed the forehead but struck the ear, partly tearing it away.

With a cry of pain and fury Jasper sprang up and away, and Adam reeled to his feet. He dropped the stone and stumbled forward. Jasper met him with a crashing blow in the face. Groaning he threw his arms wildly out for balance, and a terrific blow on the temple sent him down as inert and senseless as one of his own slabs of stone.

Panting and furious, his fists so tightly clenched that the fingers seemed to bite into his palms, Jasper stood above him waiting for him to rise; but Adam lay a-sprawl and motionless, his eyelids swelling and closing over his staring eyes. The fight was over. Barrow's brain cleared; he remembered their compact. Should he keep it? The blood from his torn ear was trickling down his neck. Adam had fought foul, and in his mad hate would never have succoured him if he had been unable to rise. A bargain was a bargain. He waited a few minutes. Darkness was upon him. He picked up his coat and hat, bound up his wound with his white cravat, and went off down the hill to the lane that led to Sheepdene.

CHAPTER XVI

AFTER THE BATTLE

THE cold night air and a soaking dew awakened Adam to consciousness. The stars were out, white and clear; with his half-blinded eyes he saw nothing but red blotches floating in a pool of darkness. His head ached and throbbed, and at first his wits were too dazed for him to realize his position and what had led to it. He sat up, dabbled his hands in the wet grass and bathed his face and head. The evaporation of the dew from his burning skin cooled and soothed him, and presently he understood all that had happened and saw what must inevitably follow. He staggered to his feet, rocked giddily for a moment or two, then groped about for his clothes. He put them on, then stumbled in darkness and semi-blindness down the hill.

The village had been abed for hours, and a restless cock was anticipating the dawn with shrill crowings when the grey, slouching figure of the

beaten stonemason groped its way by touch along the church wall in a painful search for the door of his house. He entered, and fearing the betraying light of lamp or candle, lit a lantern and went into the secluded back kitchen to remove, as far as he might, the traces of battle. His thirst was intense, and he drank greedily again and again. Going to his bedroom he took off his workaday clothes, dressed himself afresh in clean things, took some money from the bottom of the box where his clothes were kept, came down again, blew out the lantern, and went out of the house, locking the door and putting the key in his pocket. Adam was going away to hide his love and his humiliation.

He stood in the street and looked across to the inn. One eye was closed, the other burning in its socket like a hot coal; he could see nothing so far off as the width of the road. The unhappy man groaned. He wanted a glimpse of the house again and a sight of Sophie's window. He had bled for her—so, at least, he told himself; must he leave the spot that her presence hallowed and beautified and carry away no last vision? He crossed the road, ran his fingers in blindman fashion along the sacred stones that housed her. His great heart was bleeding out big drops, and he leaned his head against the door and sobbed quietly all his

misery and desolation. "My darling, my darling, why can't 'ee love me!" he moaned.

Feeling his way he went to the rear of the premises and stood for a last time against the fatal wicket-gate between the mystic bushes of elder. Holding his aching head in his hands, and not daring to look up, for he feared to stare painfully into the darkness and see nothing, he prayed humbly, devoutly, yearningly, that the God who seemed only to mock him would cherish that one pre-eminently beautiful maid into whom He had breathed the breath of life. He turned to go away; a streak of light unnoticed before fell athwart the low railings. Dimly he saw it and it made him tremble. Holding to the gate-post he turned his bruised face upwards. A light shone from Sophie's window. Why was she not sleeping? His mind replied with an answer that was an agony. When last he had seen her she had been singing happily of love. What should a maid do with that music in her heart except lie awake to think of the lover! For a minute Adam fought again with a fierce hatred of one man and an almost blasphemous railing against God. Then, with a curious logic, he told himself that he had put the matter to the arbitrament of the God of battles and had lost; the verdict was against him, but he

had had justice. He felt his way back to the street again, climbed the hill once more, and took the long downward road to Peterminster.

Far from comfortable either in mind or body, and with the blood from his torn ear soaking his cravat, Jasper had gone down the hill some hours before, following a different track from that down which Adam stumbled long afterwards in the darkness. Jasper was not for Swainswick but for Sheepdene, and he came to the road that ran under the rim of the hills and parallel with the length of the valley; from this a steep lane ran down to the stream and Miss Trotter's, climbing again towards Sheepdene House. Swainswick lay along to his right. For a moment he halted. He felt that one hurt at least required the needle of the surgeon; yet to go into the village and within tossing distance of the "Yew Tree" was to court observation and inquiry and to send news of his condition to Sophie. This would be a breach of his bargain with Adam, and his temper was such that he would keep the compact at all points, whether to his own hurt or that of his foe. Doubtless, Jane could bandage him comfortably, and the surgeon could be sent for on the morrow. He turned to the left and stepped off sharply towards the spot where the lane branched off to his own

home. The church clock chimed the quarter-to-ten as he made his decision. It was pitch-dark except in the centre of the roadway, and it was highly improbable that he would meet any one on his way. He was soon speeding down between the high, tree-crowned banks, the waters of the mill-head tumbling over the weir now breaking into the silence.

At a bend in the lane the gables of the old house appeared as dull grey shapes against a background of trees. Jasper went swiftly across the roadway bridge, gave a quick glance over his shoulder, and saw that two lights burned, one in the room where he had eaten and the other in a bedroom above. He concluded that Miss Carden was sitting reading and that her aunt was retiring for the night. A humorous twitch moved his lips. He had decided that day that his love and his destiny lay with the "Rosemary Maiden"; yet he was smarting from a battle raged as a lover of Sophie! Fate was making a tangle of the threads of his life.

"And the Rosemary Maiden?" Julia Carden had sprinkled the cold waters of ridicule upon Jasper's proffered homage and service, not because she rejected them, but because the gallant had come late. She was conscious of a desire for him and

rebelled a little against it, but the desire was there, and acknowledged. She had turned him over to her aunt coolly enough and had held aloof when he went away; it was all part of his punishment. The fact of his offer remained, and she meant that he should renew it, felt that he would be certain to do so. If the spell held her it must hold him also; she was no coquette and did not realize that she had woven a more potent charm during their brief conversation. She went to a little upper room whose window looked out upon the sloping hill, and from this coign of vantage she watched him climb the steep road and stand at the gap in the hedge and look down upon the house. Every moment of that pause in his walk distilled a drop of balm for her. When he finally disappeared she came down again to her flowers, but she avoided her aunt, preferring to keep her thoughts to herself. She did not forget his bow to Sophie Watkin nor the story of his mysterious visitor, but sensibly told herself that a gentleman might be courteous to a pretty girl, and a newcomer harbour a guest whose presence it was not easy for the gossips to explain. A dreamer herself, she loved a little mystery, and his open acknowledgment of the bond between them was sufficient answer to all doubts. She assured herself that her

lover had come; and Fate had made her ready for the wooing.

In the evening she betook herself and her book to the narrow lawn in front of the house whence she could see Sheepdene. It was a pleasant resting place on a warm summer's night, and in one's ears was the cool music of the waters rushing over the mill-head. It was a spot from which one might watch the lane unseen, and she wanted to see Jasper go by, to know whether he walked with a head bent in thought or erect like a man who had shed a burden that had troubled him. If he looked towards the house she might read his mind in his eyes. Julia was ready to play with her emotions, for so far it was her imagination rather than her heart that was touched.

. . . . . .

Jasper, giddy and bruised, and bleeding, stole by the house, making his footfalls as light as possible. But lighter footfalls and quicker were coming up the opposite side of the rise, and his intentness in listening for possible sounds from behind dulled his ears to those in front. He topped the slope of the roadway to run almost into the arms of Julia coming up the other side. With a muffled exclamation of apology he stepped

back. Her answer was a little cry of alarm. "Mr. Barrow, how you startled me!"

"I'm sorry," he said, giving the way to her and meditating a hasty "good-night" with a move onward under the darkness of the hedge. But the white bandage and his obvious trepidation betrayed him. A swift move brought her to his side. "What is the matter? You are hurt!" she cried.

"It is nothing, nothing!" he answered hastily, half stretching out a hand as though to keep her away. She put the hand down. "It is something!" Her face was within a few inches of his own. "You are smothered in blood!" Her voice shook, her fingers touched the bandage. He shrank back until the hedge brushed his hat. "It has bled a little."

"It has bled much; your cravat is soaked; and there is a wound under your eye. Mr. Barrow, what has happened?" Jasper wished her a hundred miles away, yet he thrilled at the womanly concern in her voice; and it was not so dark now that he could not see the grey eyes and the sympathy in them. Ah! they were soft at last.

"I fell—yes, I fell!" he said.

"Where?" The tone of the questioning monosyllable warned him.

"I have been on the Beacon. It is really

nothing, Miss Carden, and I am hurrying home for Jane to dress it." He laughed lightly.

"Why come away from the doctor?"

"Why bother him over trifles?"

Her hand was on the cravat again and she withdrew it with a shiver. "This requires better surgery than Jane's; come back with me; aunt and I will dress it."

"No, no; besides, Miss Trotter is in bed; I saw the light in her window. Really, Miss Carden, you must not make me feel like a little boy who has had a tumble. It is kind of you, very kind, but——"

"Yes?"

"Good-night."

The girl ignored the proffered hand. "Mr. Barrow," she said, "neighbourly responsibilities are serious things in a lonely place such as this. You are not neighbourly with me. You have not fallen. Only a bad tumble into the quarries would have bruised you and cut you so badly; and your coat has not a stain of stone dust upon it. Besides you would have gone to the doctor. I am not going to pry into your secrets. You may have enemies, some of the folk you left to come to Sheepdene; all that is your business, not mine. I am coming to your house to help Jane."

Jasper flushed with shame. He knew that his face was badly bruised, and he was acutely conscious of the reason. She, above all others, must not look closely upon it. "I am deeply obliged to you; your kindness is—is splendid; but please don't come," he said hurriedly.

"Perhaps it will help you if you take my arm," was her answer.

The man in Barrow bridled up defiantly. "I am not so hurt that I couldn't carry you all the way to Sheepdene House!" he said audaciously.

"I know it," was the quiet rejoinder. "You did not fall headlong into the quarries. You are still bleeding. It is late, and if Jane is gone to bed I *must* bring you back here and awaken aunt. It is foolish to be too proud to accept a kindness from a girl who is not so silly as to be afraid to offer it. Come, Mr. Barrow!"

A rebuke so practical was not easily answered. Jasper accepted the inevitable and went off with Julia by his side. It was a quick and silent walk; the girl said nothing, and the man felt that there was nothing he could say. The night had been crammed with unfortunate happenings, and the last, to his mind, was the worst. He hated that the girl should see his face, cut and bruised and bloody, and his heart sank at the possibility that

she might learn the truth about the twilight hour upon the Beacon. His thoughts flew to Adam; suppose his unconsciousness deepened into—! He dared not whisper the last word. Even if no tragedy followed, the comedy of two battered faces would be something more than a nine days' wonder to the good folk of the hills and the sleepy hollow. Jasper felt that wisdom lay in silence, and safety only in temporary oblivion.

The house was reached without the exchange of a word. The candles shone cheerfully enough from the big dining parlour, and through the unshuttered windows Jasper could see that his supper lay waiting upon the table. With his hand upon the heavy ring of the door-latch he turned to Julia.

"Miss Carden," he said, "my housekeeper and possibly the maid are both up and will be ready to do all that is necessary for my bruises. Is it fair to allow you to burden yourself with a disagreeable job?"

The girl faced him squarely, and he could have bowed to her for the stately erectness of her figure alone. "You don't want trembling old hands or the thick fingers of a nervous maid to-night, Mr. Barrow. Believe me, my skill is the best, except the doctor's, that is available along the valley. Don't you want me to come in?"

Jasper hesitated. "No, Miss Carden, I do not."

"Why?"

"Because I feel that my face is not a pretty thing to look upon just now. Call it my vanity if you like, but I would rather you did not see me—as I am."

A smile of amusement lightened the grey eyes. "I am coming in," she said.

Jasper opened the door. Together they went into the dining parlour, and in the light of the candles—placed carefully for the purpose—the girl examined his face. Her own features were perfectly impassive, even professional in their gravity, her cheeks paling a little in the first shock of what the bright light disclosed. Adam's iron fist had left tell-tale marks wherever it had fallen. "How many attacked you?" she asked.

"You are forgetting the accident, Miss Carden."

"No. I shall *not* forget that. If you trusted me with the true story and asked me not to remember, I could forget it easily." Her eyes challenged him.

"I am sorry, I cannot tell you; there is a pledge."

For answer she pulled forward a chair. "Please sit, Mr. Barrow. You really want the doctor. I am going to take off your bandage." The cravat was removed, Jasper watching her eyes. He saw a

sudden shrinking come into them as the torn ear was disclosed.

"Who will come if I ring the bell?" she asked.

"My housekeeper."

"Then I think I had better warn her; she is old, and you are her master."

"Am I——?"

"You are, very! Your vanity would suffer badly if you looked in a mirror." Julia pointed to his hands and their blood-smears. "Is that all your own?"

He smiled, although the movement of the face muscles pained him. "No!" he answered.

"I am glad," she said, and turned to go to the kitchen. Jasper listened to her footsteps and discovered that Miss Carden was no stranger in the passages and byways of Sheepdene House. She was gone nearly five minutes, and then returned alone. "The maid is abed and asleep, Jane deep in dreams in her old rocking-chair, and Solomon, judging from his boots beside the fender, is gone to bed also. I will awaken the old woman when I have sponged your face."

Jasper merely nodded. With deft fingers, whose very softness and lightness were a caress, she washed away the blood and cleansed the wounds. Twice only she spoke; once to say in a matter-of-

fact voice, "I am often nurse for the doctor when accidents occur. Blood never shocks me unless it is my own." The other time she remarked, "I don't know whether dark skins are as sensitive as fair ones, but you have brought home what would have kept many men groaning by the roadside."

When she had finished the bathing she stepped aside, took up a candlestick, and scrutinized him again. "You don't look so very dreadful now; I'll waken Jane and get some linen. Hold the sponge to your ear until I come back."

Jane came, newly aroused and only half understanding what was the matter. The sight of her master, bruised, dishevelled, one red wound showing and another hidden behind the sponge, was too much for her old heart, and she broke into voluble lamentations, whose pauses were punctuated by Jasper's "An accident, Jane; looks worse than it is; a little blood makes a lot of mess!" and so on. Plaster and bandage were requisitioned, but it was some time before Jasper was lying back in his easy chair, cool, clean, fairly comfortable, but looking otherwise rather a sorry figure. Jane had opened a bottle of wine and Miss Carden had accepted a glass. She sat with it in her hand and looking at her patient. The discreet old woman stole from the room.

Jane's departure was not the signal for immediate conversation. Julia sat sipping her wine and Jasper occupied himself with watching her. Once he glanced sideways at the clock; eleven had struck, and the hills and valley were asleep. It was an unwonted hour for a rustic maiden to be out alone, but he comforted himself by concluding that his companion was a law unto herself in such matters. The velvet of her fingers still seemed to touch his bruised face, and he thought her surpassingly lovely as she sat with easy confidence and naturalness beside his table. She thrilled him more now than when her hands were ministering to him and her breath stirring his tumbled hair. He wanted to tell her of the night's adventure, and would have done so despite his promise to Adam, but he felt that he could not explain Sophie's unconscious part in the affair.

He spoke. "Miss Carden, I want you to believe that I am most deeply grateful for your kindness. I am even glad that you made me accept it. I do not know how to repay you, but I will try to do so. Will you forgive me for speaking to you of an 'accident'? I cannot, dare not, tell you more than you know."

"We shall expect to find you a man who carries secrets, Mr. Barrow."

"No, no!" he replied hastily. "I do not wish to have any secrets from you!"

The grey eyes flashed upon him. "Why me, Mr. Barrow?"

"Because of two nights; this is one."

"Forget both."

"Will you do so?"

"I may remember other things better."

"And I never shall."

"You almost forgot one."

"I don't think it ever left me for a moment, either sleeping or waking. Miss Carden, will you give me another sprig of rosemary?"

"No."

"Do you forbid me to pluck one from your garden?"

"Would you obey me if I did?"

"Yes." The answer was quick and emphatic. She looked up. "I will take nothing from you that you do not give," he added.

"You threw the rosemary away."

"Everything else shall be cherished."

There was a thoughtful pause. "I want to ask you a question, Mr. Barrow. Are you likely to be in danger again as you were to-night?"

His thoughts winged away once more to Adam. "It is unlikely," he answered.

"Why do you think so?" The eyes questioned more eagerly than the voice.

"I wish I could explain, Miss Carden. I daren't, can't!"

"To tell me would renew the risk?"

"It would bring a worse danger; you might regret your kindness of to-night."

"Is not that thinking meanly of me?"

"No, I am afraid for myself. A man may fear, and yet not be a coward."

"Meaning yourself?"

Jasper flushed. "No!" he answered, "I find that I can be a coward."

Julia rose up. Stiffly and painfully he followed her example. "You despise me!"

"No," she said quietly. "I do not understand you."

"Would you try to do so if I told?"

"Yes." There was a promise of fine trust in the firm reply. He stood for a moment, his dark eyes appraising every line and tint that made the sum of her beauty; love, too, was surging up in his heart. He remembered the fierce, unreasoning jealousy of the women who dwelt in tents. Surely one so proud as she would be merciless to even an appearance of faithlessness. He dared not risk the disclosure that might turn her

against him. "It is impossible—just now," he said.

She accepted his decision with an inclination of the head, and turned towards the door. He followed her. "You are not venturing out," she said.

"Certainly."

"But I am not afraid."

He winced. "No one would harm any one so beautiful and so kind," he said. "But I must have a little of my own way, so please do not refuse my escort. Besides, I have something yet to ask you."

"What is that?"

"That you will say nothing of how you found me to-night. I shall stay indoors, visible to none but Jane, until these cuts and bruises are healed."

"You ought to see the doctor about your ear."

"I will do that."

Together they walked down the hill, but not a word passed between them. At the gate of the house they spoke a neighbourly farewell and Jasper renewed his thanks before he released her hands. He waited to hear the bolts of the door click into the staples, then turned homewards.

CHAPTER XVII

FAMILIAR FACES VANISH

JASPER spent the night in ceaseless tossings. Every bone in his body ached from the fight, and his head throbbed and burned from the pain of his wounds. But his mental disquiet was harder to bear than the bodily unrest. Julia had proved herself in his eyes; her courage, independence, womanliness, sympathy, tenderness, and true camaraderie of spirit, were as patent to him as her physical beauty. Throughout the long watches of the night he saw her as the one woman in the world for him. And he had refused her his confidence, mistrusted her, mistrusted himself, and failed lamentably to seize an occasion thrust into his hands. Fate was making a sport of him. In one day he had offered himself to her and then denied the whole spirit of his offer. He cursed Adam. Thoughts of the stonemason worried him persistently. He wanted some tidings of the former's condition and movements, and reports of

any gossip circulating in the little world amongst the hills. He decided to make a full confidante of old Jane, feeling that nothing short of murder would shake her faith in him. His expectations were realized. The tale gave the prosaic, age-dimmed eyes a peep into a real land of adventure where young heroes still fought for a maiden's smile. And to have all this as a secret made the thing sweeter still. With convulsive clutchings at the counterpane, and many an "Oh!" and "Ah!" and "Lord!" and "Dang 'un!" she punctuated the story, seeing the progress of the fight in the signs of the battle upon her master's face.

"Well!" she exclaimed, when the recital was over, "I never heard tell o' such a thing in these parts afore; a gentleman born fightin' wi' a common man over a wench no better than Jim Watkin's daughter!"

Barrow smiled. "It has happened a thousand times, and because of maidens far less charming than Sophie. The girl is as beautiful and as various as a garden!"

"Pretty enough," agreed Jane, not understanding fully the enthusiastic illustration; "but I think 'twas a pity ye beat Adam."

"Pity! Why?"

"Well, seeing ye've won the wench ye must

take her. Bain't much use bargaining for a thing and beating down the price so low as ye please if 'ee doan't buy."

"You mean I should marry Sophie?"

"So good-natured and dainty a little maid ought not to go to a man's bed except by way of the church door; but if so be ye bain't minded to marry, she must come to 'ee without it!" Jane's soul was well tinted with Paganism and ideals from the dark ages, and a peasant maid was still a chattel for the gentleman, if he were minded to assert the rights of his birth. "If ye took her that way 'twould leave 'ee free for t'other 'un," she added.

"T'other 'un!" echoed Jasper.

"She that tended 'ee. 'Twas Fate that brought her to meet 'ee last night. And she took 'ee in hand just as though ye were her man."

"Which I am, Jane, or mean to be."

"And Watkin's maid?"

"Sophie and I are friends. Stone forced the fight on me by accusing me of an intention to trifle with the girl and throw her aside. I fought him because he lied. And now I want you to go up to Swainswick and find out what has become of the stonemason. Let Solomon drive you over."

"Job Woodyatt's boy will suit I better; he hears

nowt. Solomon would find out what I wanted to know by the way I talked to folks. When heads ha' slept on the same pillow for fifty years the one brain knows what t'other is tickin'."

Jane rose up. "Has Miss Carden sent up?" asked Jasper.

"No, maister, but I'll call as I go by."

Jasper mused for a moment. "Don't call; I want to see if she will send."

Mrs. Gosling, raised to the dignity of the Sheepdene gig and a Jehu of her own choosing, drove off to the village on the opposite hill. The old woman had plenty of simple rustic dignity, and in her well-saved black silk dress, Paisley shawl, and ancient poke bonnet, looked like the comfortable dowager of a respectable farmer. Swainswick received her graciously. A few old acquaintances greeted her with an "A'rternoon ma'am!" that had a grin behind it, but Jane made allowances. She knew that down the hill from the main street lay the little stone cottage to which she must one day return. She was elevated from the dusty roadway to a little brown chariot drawn by a shaggy pony, but was too wise to make her exalted condition a cause of offence and a taunt for the humbler days in store.

Young Woodyatt pulled up at the "Yew Tree,"

this being the inn that his master had made his own house of call, and the custom of Sheepdene bound all who owed service to its owner. Dicky Babs, who, as cobbler, was master of his own time, slid his dangling little legs off the ale bench and helped Jane to alight.

"Thank 'ee," said Jane, giving his hand a friendly grip.

"Proud to do it, ma'am!" replied Dicky. "When I seed 'ee ridin' along I says to myself, 'here cometh a parable.'"

"Ay," said Jane, a trifle suspiciously, and young Woodyatt twisted round in his seat to hear Dicky's wisdom. "Ye might call it 'the Parable of the Dressed Woman,' or ye might call it 'the Parable of the Stripped Woman,'" pursued the cobbler. "Put 'ee in silk and mount 'ee on a cushion wi' no hands and feet showin' and ye look as well as a squire's lady; that's where the parable is in clothes, so to speak, and ye be lifted up by 'em. Take it t'other way round, strip two bodies and lay 'em side by side, and 'tis only by the hands and feet that ye'll know the duchess from the tinker's wife."

"Why the feet, maister?" asked the lad.

"Poverty stands on the broad foot, my son, and she that tramps the roads would be sore pinched

in the little shoes of her that kips a carriage." Dicky looked down at Jane's feet. "Your shoes do give 'ee away, missis."

"Bain't ashamed of 'em, Richard!"

"No," agreed Dicky, "but ye looked just prapper sittin' up so straight and the shawl so neat about 'ee. 'Twas just my thoughts."

"Well," said Jane, "seems to me that them as mends for the feet do always kip sound in their own heads."

"Ay," said Dicky, "we cobblers do think, just about, I can tell 'ee! How be gran'feyther?"

"Very well, thank 'ee."

"Tell 'un I do miss his old face and his merry word. Ther' was gran'feyther and Adam and me, always here for a noon ale. To-day, ther' was but myself, and the ale drunk that flat, I'd as lief had water."

"Why wasn't Adam here?" asked Jane, alarmed that he should have broken a custom that was many years strong.

"Can't tell 'ee," replied Dicky. "His house be shut and nobody doan't know wher' a' be."

Mrs. Gosling felt a little faint. "I be just goin' inside to have a minute's clack wi' Sophie," she said, and turned into the doorway. "Be I to call for ale?" sang out young Woodyatt. Jane looked

back and remembered what was due from her as a "carriage person" from Sheepdene.

"Of course ye be; do 'ee expect I to fetch it out to 'ee?" she answered.

"How long be I to wait? 'Tis main hot for powny this side o' the street."

"Hitch 'un under church wall, then; maybe I shall have a cup o' tea." Jane disappeared.

"Fetch I out a pint, Maister Babs," said Woodyatt.

"Shall we say a quart," suggested Dicky. "My noon ale were spoiled, drinkin' alone."

"A quart'll do, and we'll have drink and drink about." The pony was fastened in the shade, and leather and hayseed sat down to gossip. Meanwhile Mrs. Gosling was seated in the cool kitchen having her "clack" with Sophie. At the sight of the old woman the maid's face had lighted up with a summer glory of colour that told a tale to the shrewd old eyes. The girl's first thought was that Jane had come to fetch her to Sheepdene to discuss housekeeping, for since Jasper's departure the previous evening this promised excursion had been in her mind to the exclusion of everything else. Sophie asked after gran'feyther, and it was a fairly natural transition from this to the inquiry, "How is Mr. Barrow?"

"Bain't very well," said Jane drily.

"No!" There was a little flurry of alarm about the exclamation.

"Had an accident," pursued Jane, and she duly noted the quick rise of a little brown hand towards a throbbing heart. "Must ha' gone a-climbin'," she went on, "and fell down main hard upon his face; cut it just about bad, I can tell 'ee; one mark he'll carry for many a day!"

Sophie simply stared, the beautiful, gazelle-like eyes wide open and dewy with sympathy. Jane's lips straightened and thinned a little. "I didn't see 'un at the worst, and I be glad on't, for it giv' my heart a turn as 'twas!"

"Poor Mr. Barrow!" piped Sophie, and the jewel of a maiden's tear glistened on the long under lashes.

Jane noted it, and its appearance decided her next words. "Lucky for I and lucky for he that Miss Carden was out a-walkin' and met 'un, and the lane above her house be so narrow that her couldn't help seein'. She knowed my old fingers'd be no good at patchin' a gentleman's face, so, bein' one of his own sort her comed home wi' 'un. When I did see 'un the blood was all bathed off and she were a bindin' of un' up. And so gentle was it done and wi' such soft and nimble fingers,

maister a-settin' so patient, and the young lady so cheerful and tender wi' 'un, that 'twas a picter!"

Poor little Sophie's face paled to the whiteness of a lily. "I—I suppose they are great friends," she said.

"Bless 'ee, my dear, you might have called 'em strangers afore last night. But it seemed as nat'ral as nat'ral for she to be ther'. And so handsome she looked! And her moved that fine body of hers round 'un this way and that, so that the thought comed to my mind, 'Ah! my pretties, ye'll come closer than that some day.' So nat'ral it seemed that if he had put his arms about her and drawed her tight to 'un I should h' said 'God bless 'em.' And how be you gettin' on wi' Adam, my dear?"

It was a cruel question, and Jane knew it, but the old woman was on the side of Fate and the hazard of the midsummer feast. She had sighed for Joe Blake and yet wedded Sol Gosling. Sophie might yearn for the stranger gentleman; he was not for her by way of marriage; she must take as her spouse the dusty stonemason.

"I doan't get on wi' 'un at all!" said Sophie, her agitation throwing her speech into the vernacular, and her lips quivering on the verge of crying.

"Doan't 'ee, now! Well, that's a pity; such a good man be Adam!" exclaimed Jane.

"I do hate 'un!" The passion in the cry was startling, but the old dame kept her wits.

"Ye doan't surprise me," she replied coolly; "indeed, 'tis nat'ral enough. Now here be you, dainty as a rose, my dear, all a-quiver wi' maiden's pride, and shrinkin' from a man's touch. Now Adam be big and gloomy, strong, but wi' a cloud about 'un that hides 'un. Either you would fly to 'un at once—ther's many like 'ee as would—or you'd hold off, frightened at what 'ee doan't understand. 'Tis always one way or t'other wi' such as you and Adam. But you'll go to 'un, my dear, and love 'un as never was. And that great heart of his'n will beat on your little one as true as true." Jane leaned forward and took the girl's hand. "Doan't 'ee be afraid, Sophie, ye'll never be tired of Adam, because ye'll never know 'un through and through. Even when his childer be about your knee and you do see 'un comin' home, ther'll always be the wonder in your pretty head, 'What will 'a say? Will 'a kiss me once, or twice, or a hundred times?' They great hearts do close up at a touch at times; but your little hand laid soft on his'n will send along a throb that'll burst open the gates, and he'll take 'ee in and lie 'ee there as snug

as a baby under its mother's breasts. Doan't 'ee fear Adam's love, my dear; 'twill try 'ee at times, but his heart will be your wishin' well and a deep one; at a word from 'ee the love will come bubblin' up so that ye may drink and drink as many of us never have done."

And Sophie? She put her arms about the old woman's neck and sobbed over a sweet dream-cup that the latter had dashed from her lips. When the crying was over Jane kissed her and went out. Her heart smote her for what she had done, and she dared not stay to look upon the tear-stained face. She was in the secret service of the goddess of the midsummer moon; the grey-eyed maid had been chosen; brown eyes must weep for a while because they had looked unbidden above their station. Moreover, the little maid had a heart that must be mended and a soul that must be saved. So Jane thought in her softened mood of orthodox morality. There was no chance that Sophie would visit Sheepdene.

Jim Watkin was at the door, and Jane held him in talk so that he might not discover his daughter's condition. She wanted to ask more questions concerning Adam, and the carrier driving down the street gave her the answers. He brought two letters in the stonemason's handwriting, one for

the parson and one for Watkin. Wonderingly the latter opened his and read it two or three times without comment.

"Well?" asked Jane impatiently.

"Never knowed 'un leave home since he comed here a little nameless boy!" he exclaimed.

"Wher's he to?"

"Gone away; won't be back for wiks."

"Found his relations!" ejaculated Dicky Babs.

Watkin shook his head. He thought otherwise, and his suspicions touched the truth without realizing it. Jane drove home. She carried news.

No message of inquiry came up to Sheepdene House from Miss Trotter's. For a day and a night the aunt had no knowledge that anything was amiss with her new neighbour; the niece knew too much, and also too little, and it was that which she did not know that kept her from showing an open interest in Jasper's condition. But by a score of small actions she betrayed herself to her sharp-eyed relative. Miss Trotter knew that Julia had gone out late on the evening of Jasper's call. This was not in itself sufficient to excite remark, for the girl often wandered about in the near neighbourhood of her home when the tired villagers were abed. But she was out for an unusually long time and come back with a companion.

Miss Trotter was sure of this, for she heard the murmur of voices at the gate, and caught the echo of footsteps going back up Sheepdene Hill. She had lain and wondered whether it was Jasper, and smiled to think the young people were both given to starlight wandering and had met in the lane.

However, Julia said nothing the next morning, and a broad hint about the length of her ramble evoked no answer. When Miss Trotter heard that Jasper was ill, she wondered, and at the first opportunity spoke to her niece. "I hear Mr. Barrow is unwell—actually in bed!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," replied Julia.

"When did you hear the news?"

"I knew it before it was news."

"Knew it!" Miss Trotter adjusted her spectacles judiciously. Julia faced her coolly.

"He met with some sort of accident."

"How?"

Julia turned away. "I have no further knowledge except that the doctor visits him." The girl spoke with a finality that made further questions impossible. But Miss Trotter suspected and watched, and finally made up her mind that her niece was keeping a secret from her, and that their neighbour had his secret also. Knowing her niece and the possibilities of her temperament

she quickly realized how scanty an acquaintance the girl had had with the world of men. So little knowledge might well prove the dangerous thing. Thus it happened that before Jasper was fit to face his world again Julia and her aunt had vanished from the valley for a season.

CHAPTER XVIII

SALLY BURDOCK TAKES A STEP

AUGUST was in the valley, turning the corn to rippling lakes of gold and greening the pastures with a rich aftermath following the mowing of the hay. The trees in the snug and sheltered gardens were heavy with ripening fruit; a heat haze fringed the horizon, and the woods stood motionless in the hot air. Against the dark greens of the trees the gabled, grey-stone houses showed up with a startling lightness, and the limestone roads trailed clear and distinct up and down and about in the valley and away over the shoulders of the hills. They were the days between the harvests; the hay was ricked and thatched, and the corn not yet ready for the sickle. There had been plenty of rain during the latter part of July, and the springs which break out so plentifully along the Cotswold slopes were pouring sweet waters into the old mill-stream that twisted and turned at the narrow bottom of the lovely green trough that was

Petersham, Sheepdene, and Swainswick. There was little to do on the farms except look after the cattle and put the cleansing hoe between the lines of swedes and mangolds and turnips. Slow-moving figures, mostly women in sun-bonnets, could be discerned in the root grounds making a leisurely hoer's progress, one that was broken for a gossip many a time in the length of a furrow. Sally Burdock, whose ways had a measure of independence, was busy in a small ground of turnips close at home and within clear view of the house. Sol, stuffed to repletion with a good dinner and wanting nothing so little as he wanted movement or labour, was watching the big girl from a shady seat in a wagon. The old man drew the last possible puff from his black cutty, tapped out the dust, and put the pipe into his pocket.

The rhythm of Sally's movements suggested melody, and he began to sing:

"Some be fond o' hay makin'
An' some be fond o' mowin',
But of all the jobs as I likes best
Gie I the turmut howin'!

"The fly, the fly,
The fly be on the turmut,
'Tis all me eye, no use to try
To kip 'un off the turmut!

"Sometimes I be a-mowin'
Sometimes I be a-plowin'
Gettin' furrows bright and clear
For the turmut sowin'!

"The fly, the fly,
The fly be on the turmut,
'Tis all me eye, no use to try
To kip 'un off the turmut."

The ancient quavered on for the better part of a dozen verses when his streams of melody and remembrance were broken by the appearance of the huge bulk of Matthew Beech. He was in breeches and shirt, his big bull throat open to the air. Matthew, too, had been watching Sally, and he threw a last glance in her direction as he came abreast of Sol. The old man gave a pull at his billycock. "Warmish, farmer!" he exclaimed.

"Warmish 'tis, gran'feyther, and fine weather for the corn."

"Just about," said Sol. "Your'n be a-lookin' better'n I've seed it for many a year."

Beech laughed. "Reckon I be gettin' wiser as I be gettin' older, eh?"

"Well, 'tis a sin to make a muck o' God's good ground."

"Ay, ay," said Beech musingly, and took another look at Sally.

"Fine wench, that, gran'feyther!"

"Just about, and a nation good worker. Hirin's up at Michaelmas; goin' to be married."

"Who is the man?"

"Dick Burridge, o' Swainswick."

"I know him,—a shambling, bow-legged fellow."

"Not much of a figure to 'un," agreed Sol, shifting to a fresh position.

"H'm!"

"Thinkin' of makin' a bid for Sally?" asked Sol.

"Ay, but for housework. I want to tidy up indoors as well as out. The wench is strong and clean and not bad to look at." Beech twisted round for another contemplative stare, and the old man eyed him keenly. He spoke. "Job Woodyatt was a-tellin' I that he heard Sally talkin' of trying a year indoors afore she married."

Beech spun round quickly. "Did she?"

"Ay, but her idea was to come indoors here."

"Where's Mr. Barrow?"

"You'll find 'un in the porch a-readin', a-sleepin', or a-dreamin'."

"Or staring down upon a certain house, eh?" Beech bestowed a fat wink upon Solomon.

Sol returned the signal. "Reckon he'll see the flutter of a muslin frock in the garden long afore

I shall." Beech went off to the front of the house. Jasper was seated in the cool, stone porch-way and looking down and across the half-slumbering valley. Outside the porch the air quivered and danced with heat; the flowers were drooping in the glare, and save for the hum of the insect world not a sound broke the summer's stillness. Jasper looked up, and a white mark on the bronzed olive of his cheek showed where Adam's hard fist had fallen.

"Dam'd hot!" said Beech, and dropped his unwieldy body on the step in the shadow.

Jasper nodded. "Days like this make me dream —dream of places where the glare is whiter, and a green grove is a part of the Garden of Eden."

"And Eve, pink-skinned and tawny-haired weaving herself a chaplet of roses? A drop of the ancestral blood gets into your brain and you dream of Arabian nights and days."

Barrow smiled. "Possibly!"

"The only Eve I've seen this afternoon is hoeing turnips. I warrant she's pink enough where the sun hasn't touched her. I wonder how she would look with a chaplet of roses?"

"Who?"

"Sally Burdock."

"Oh!" Jasper relapsed into indifference.

"Solomon tells me she's hired with you until Michaelmas and won't hire for field work again."

"Solomon knows; I don't."

"And she has a hankering for housework and wants to come indoors. Has she said anything to you?"

"The house is Jane's province, and I don't interfere; better see the old woman."

"You can serve my turn just as well." Beech moved round a little so as to face the other. "Now look here, Barrow. You have seen my place; it is like a kennel, and I've been living in it for many years like a stray dog. Time is flying with me, and winter follows even such days as these. I mean to have more comfort, d'ye see?"

"Well, you have been pleasing yourself."

"Exactly, but my taste is altering. I want a clean house and cosiness the same as another man. Old Ann Thomas is about past work, and I mean to have somebody young and strong. If Sally Burdock will hire for housework with me will you let her off?"

"At once?"

"At once!"

"We can't spare so good a hand at harvest time."

"I'll help you myself; one neighbourly turn deserves another."

Barrow began to get sharply interested—and suspicious. "Why Sally?"

"She'd suit me better than any one else. The wench can work like a horse, is clean, and has a pleasant face to look upon when I'm indoors."

"And Ann?"

"I'll pension her with a few shillings a week."

"Yes?"

"That's all!"

"Not quite."

Beech stretched out his long legs. "You 're right; that isn't quite all. I hope Sally will be a bit pliable other ways."

Jasper sat back. "You'll be a fool to make any bargain with her, and she a bigger fool if she goes to you."

"I don't think so. I've been a lonely dog, with a wife and no wife for more years than I care to count. I'm tired of it. Sally shall have the offer of a home—I give you a neighbourly warning—and if she can make it a good one for herself, 'tis bound to be a comfortable one for me."

"Your wife may come back."

"She will be too late!" Beech got up, stood for a moment scanning the glowing landscape, nodded a curt good-afternoon, and strode off. He looked around for Solomon, but the old man had vanished.

The farmer walked along towards where Sally was steadily working, a lone figure in a landscape of gold and green against a background of blue haze. He noted a curious thing as he walked—he, she, and the spire of Swainswick Church were in a straight line. "We shan't get as far as yon!" he muttered.

Beech reached the side of the girl, who turned a slow head at the sound of his footsteps rustling amidst the foliage of the turnips. He stood beside her, his hands thrust deeply into his breeches pockets, and she leaning not ungracefully upon her hoe. They talked for nearly half-an-hour, yet not once did either move a hand in a gesture; apparently they stood as stolid and unemotional as the hills that ringed them in. The man talked volubly; the woman answered only by short nods and monosyllables. In the end he continued his way to his own house; she stood and watched him until he disappeared over the stile, then she went on placidly with her hoeing until she reached the end of the furrow. At that point her whole demeanour changed. She threw the hoe against the hedge, let down the coarse linsey-woolsey skirt which she had tied up almost to her knees, smoothed back her tumbled hair, adjusted her sun-bonnet, and trudged

off over the yielding ground, head erect, for the house.

She entered the kitchen, put a big earthenware pan under the pump and filled it with the cold clear hill-water. Her bonnet was thrown aside, her bodice stripped off, and Jane came in to find the round arms—white from shoulder to elbow and brown below—immersed in a cooling bath. The girl heard her, but neither turned nor spoke. She soused her sun-tanned face, her neck, her bosom, whilst the old woman, her mouth twitching oddly, stood and watched her. Sally reached out a dripping arm for the rough towel and commenced to dry herself.

"You're finished early, Sally?"

"I've done wi' it!"

Jane choked back an angry gulp. "I seed 'ee both from the window," she said.

"I reckoned you would," answered Sally.

"And Solomon told I about his watchin' 'ee and askin' after 'ee."

"That's likely enough."

"What's the meanin' of it?"

Sally rubbed her face until it shone. "I be goin' to house-kip for Farmer Beech."

Jane swallowed another gulp. "You be hired on here till Michaelmas and then you be goin' to marry Dick Burridge."

Sally dried an arm and looked at it; it was plump and strong and shapely, although the hands were growing coarse. "I be goin' to Farmer Beech to-day—he've made it right wi' maister—and Dick Burridge will have to wait, maybe a long time."

Jane sat down. "Sally, have you thought about it?"

"For dree wiks, as long as askin's be up in church. I knowed he was watchin' I, and I guessed what he was thinkin' about."

Sally finished her drying and picked up her bodice. She faced Jane, erect, defiant, yet cool, and with a certain vigorous handsomeness about her. "I know what you be thinkin' and you can say it out," she exclaimed.

"I doan't want to speak bad of 'ee, my girl."

"But you be thinkin' it."

"Be you goin' to live alone wi' him?"

"Ann Thomas will go next wik."

"You know what folks will say when 'tis a man like Farmer and a—a good-lookin' girl like you be?"

Sally smiled. "What they do say may not be what I do mean."

"He's a married man, whose wife wouldn't live wi' 'un."

"One's meat is another's poison. Turn it

about, and what one woman doan't want to eat, another will make a good dinner of. I be goin' to Farmer, and he'll have to ax more'n once afore I goes beyond housework for 'un. He be gettin' oldish and soft, and won't come the maister over I if I doan't want 'un too; reckon I can manage he, though, any day." Sally smiled again, for her ears still tingled with some praises that Beech had heaped upon her in the solitude of the turnip field.

"You be goin' to ruination, Sally," cried Jane, sitting helpless in the face of the girl's coolness and commanding physique.

"Not if I knows it, Jane. I've lived on the pickin's of such bones as folks have been minded to give me ever since I can remember. Now I be goin' to be my own missus and have the cut off the joint that do best suit my fancy. Farmer will treat I well." She mused for a moment and then laughed softly to herself. "He'll have to!" she said.

"But," cried Jane in a last appeal, "suppose anything happened!"

"Happenin's will be in my hands," said Sally.

"Doan't go; at least, doan't go until we've had another talk about it!"

"I be goin' at once," was the answer.

Sally packed up her box of scanty belongings and went.

CHAPTER XIX

CLOUDS GATHERING OVER THE VALLEY

THE oats were cut and stooked and the wheat rustling its call for the sickle when Miss Trotter and her niece returned from their travels. They had been to Peterminster and its neighbouring fashionable spa, to London, and to the sea at Brighton. A round of visits had been paid to relations and family connexions, who had hitherto been mere names and shadows to Julia Carden. Her fresh beauty had brought her a host of admirers, whilst her outspoken manner and absence of prudery and false shame had made her a few enemies. Going into the world with a mind fresh and alert, eager and inquiring, her knowledge of men and women had widened and deepened almost immeasurably. She was come back to the little green valley that was so large a piece of her life to see its dwellers with new eyes and judge them with a new understanding.

Her neighbour, Mr. Jasper Barrow, did not see

her come, neither did he learn about it for a night and a day. When the gig came along from Hillborough he was away down in a wheat ground that gave no view of the road. He stood to watch Job Woodyatt lead the sickle men in the slow and rhythmic measure that was the reaping of the corn. And the carter had no Sally Burdock with him to gather into her ample arms the heavy golden swathes that fell before his reaping-hook. Sally was gathering the early apples in Beech's orchard, vowing as she picked up the small deteriorated fruit that she would have every aged, lichened tree down and fresh ones planted before the frost set in. And the amorous farmer put his arm about her waist and kissed her on the full red lips with a "So ye shall, my dear. Damn it! I am grown young again and I'll have nought but youth about me." Sally was allowing certain lover-like privileges, but setting a rigid limit of bounds about them. Old Ann Thomas was still in the house, for Sally, after all, had flatly refused to consent to her summary dismissal. "There'll be talk enough," she said to Matthew, "and we may as well spite the gossips for a few wiks." The farmer agreed with this and revolved another piece of worldly wisdom in his own mind. If Sally were installed in full authority and strutting in the fine

new clothes already in the making at Peterminster, scandal would be buzzing like a valley full of bees and make the hiring of servants at Michaelmas a difficult matter. Farm and house were to be properly staffed, and this would mean four or five lads and girls sleeping in the house. Therefore Ann's lease of authority was to last until October was well on its way. Rumour was not silent, that was impossible; but its solitary basis of fact was the sudden jilting of Dick Burridge, who took heavily to drinking and was approved in this wild course by many sympathizers, who looked upon his conduct as strictly appropriate to the occasion. The thorough cleansing and repairing of the farmhouse would have excited more comment had it not been preceded by some months of better attention to the farm itself. A few knowing ones saw Sally's hand in this and were free enough with prophecies of what was going to happen. The estimate of the girl's powers went up in the village mind in the same ratio as the assessment of her morals went down.

On the morrow of Miss Trotter's return to Sheepdene, Adam Stone came back to Swainswick, and there was a real connexion between the two events, as was presently to appear. The sexton came up the steep of the Hillborough road in the

quiet of mid-afternoon, put his key into the door of his cottage, threw open the windows, and proceeded to sweep out the accumulated dust of weeks. The daughter of a neighbour went shopping for him and prepared him a meal. When he had eaten this he lit his pipe and walked across the street to the "Yew Tree," as though the habit had never been broken for a day. Sophie, who had watched his door anxiously and half fearfully, shut herself up in her own bedroom. Premonitions of danger had been troubling the girl's heart for weeks, and she was frankly afraid of meeting her old lover.

Adam did not enter the inn, but sat himself in his usual place on the bench outside. Dicky Babs had been watching and waiting and hoping, behind the rolls of leather in his tiny shop, and now came over to greet the returned wanderer. Like Sophie, he had vague fears and wondered how his old friend would receive him. He resolved to make his plunge a bold one. He came forward with his pattering steps, wreathed from billycock to boots in about five feet of smiles, and he framed his welcome in the most jovial form of the Cotswold jargon.

"How bist!" he exclaimed. And the saturnine giant unbent. "Famous, Dicky! How bist

thee?" Dicky hopped up on his perch. "Why, nation glad to see thee, Adam. How's furrin' parts?" "I'd not give yon yews for all the forests in 'em!" exclaimed the sexton; and he meant it.

" How be the friend you went to see?"

"Better, Dicky; almost well, I might say."

"And you be home for good?"

"Ay, for good. How's everybody?"

"Same as they was. Sophie looks a bit peart; pined after 'ee, I should say." The sexton's face hardened. "I suppose you never sent her a line?"

"No."

"I tried my best wi' her. Used to spend the whole time of soling a pair o' shoes to think of something to make her laugh. But ther'! I never got more'n the ghost of a smile, lastin' one tap o' the hammer as you might say. I'm glad ye be back, Adam. Ale good wher' you've been?"

"Tolerable!"

"Went pretty flat here at times. Shall we say a quart?"

Adam was plunged in a reverie, called up by a vision of Sophie sad. The little cobbler was too sympathetic to disturb him, so swung his ludicrous little legs and waited. "How be the gipsy man

over to Sheepdene?" asked the stonemason suddenly.

Dicky stared, for his thoughts were miles away from that particular personage. "Oh! he've been prapper bad; fell down the quarry and bashed hisself about a good 'un. Ha'n't seed much of the gentleman; come about twice, I should reckon. First time he were gone again afore I could get across to pass the time o' day wi' 'un; second time he and Sophie went a walk up over the Beacon."

"We'll hev' the quart," cried Adam sharply.

"Ay," responded Dicky, and he toddled indoors.

The sexton's face set harder than the stone he chiselled. "I'll fight 'un again, but it won't be wi' fistes, damn him!" he muttered. The Sheepdene gig, Solomon driving, came down the road and pulled up at the inn, the old man's face expressing the surprise that, for the moment, held him speechless. "Why, 'tis never Adam Stone!" he called out, then scrambled from the gig, his hand stretched forth in greeting. "How be 'ee, me boy?"

"Fairish!" replied Adam.

"Ay, I should say that's about the true word. Your high colour be gone, my son, look a bit pasty ye do. Well, I be glad to see 'ee. Folks have worritted about 'ee more'n a bit."

"Ay."

"Made some of 'em think about their latter ends. 'Tis mortal unlucky to die when sexton be away and have your grave dug by strange hands."

"Oh!" The grave-digger displayed but little interest.

"Thought about my own buryin'. Be ye very strict, Adam, about laying a corpse east and west?"

"'Tis the proper way."

"But not necessary to salvation, so to speak?"

"That's settled afore the earth be heaped over 'ee."

"Just my opinion. Now look here, Adam; 'tis in my mind to be buried with my face turned towards this old spot, lookin' upon all of 'ee that be left when I be gone. 'Tis the roundabout way I know, but I reckon a man will hear the trump whichever way he's lying."

"I reckon," said Adam.

"Well, then, I'll put it in my will."

Adam stared; Sol beamed. "That's what it's come to. What with the bit I've saved, and fourteen shill'uns and all found over at Sheepdene, there'll be something to trouble the lawyer about, and he shall set it hard and fast in writin.' Jane

will never want, the young maister's that fond of her; so the money shall all go to the buryin', except a goldy boy for funeral ale. Ye'll all stand up along here, gie I a nod and a 'Here's to 'ee, Solomon!' I shall be waitin' for it, and t'will make I sleep as sound as the church till the trumpet blast comes along."

"Ay!"

"Ye'll do it?"

"We'll do it."

"Then the lawyer shall write it down and hold the parson fast to the bargain."

Dicky came out with the ale, and all three took a solemn pull. There's a proper ritual of "home-brewed," and the peasant is its priest.

Adam was not talkative, and presently Sol remembered that he was out upon an errand. He rose up. "Well, I must be gettin' along to Hillborough." Dicky's eyes flashed a request for fuller information. "Goin' to meet an unknown female at the station. She'll know I, so Jane says, but I shan't know she. If I finds I do know her I bain't to say so."

"Sounds queer," commented Dicky.

"It do; but ther' 'tis!" Sol got into the gig and gathered up the reins. He put them down again. "Almost forgettin'," he called out, and held up a

letter. "For Miss Sophie, and to be delivered at once."

Dicky went to fetch it and Solomon drove off. Instantly Adam was on his feet. "Let I see that," he cried harshly. The little cobbler gave it up, awed by the evil expression in his companion's face.

The stonemason examined the neat, angular writing on the envelope, and a strange scent from the paper stole into his nostrils. "'Tis from a lady; take it in," he said. Adam sat down again, listening for the sound of Sophie's voice.

Ten minutes later, Sophie, hurriedly dressed, came through the door and passed into the street without even a glance at her old lover; the letter was in her hand. She crossed the road, passed round the church wall, and took the lower way to Sheepdene. Adam sprang up, but at that moment Watkin's hand came upon his shoulder. "She is goin' to Miss Trotter's," he said.

"And ther's a strange woman comin' in secret to the gipsy gentleman," was the savage reply.

CHAPTER XX

A CONFESSION

WHEN Miss Trotter took her niece for a visit to the larger world she had both instinct and knowledge to guide her action. Julia had been dumb or had given evasive answers to her questions; other folks had proved less difficult to handle. Jane talked—guardedly, it is true—but enough for Miss Trotter. Gossip trickled down the hill to the old grey house beside the stream; it told of the quarrel between two such noted lovers as Adam and Sophie, and it hinted with a smirk that the dark eyes of the master of Sheepdene could always bring blush roses in a cluster to the pretty maid's cheeks.

And Miss Trotter had met the stonemason in the streets of Peterminster, in the obscure "island" of which city he had been hiding his disgrace. One mark of the hilltop fray, to wit, a badly discoloured right eye, was still visible and under guise of a friendly cup of tea the astute old lady

conducted an examination and cross-examination so dexterous that poor blundering Adam let out all his story save only the name of his assailant. Miss Trotter mentally supplied this and was perfectly sure that she had guessed the right man. A comedy was being set upon the green stage of the valley and the little old lady had a part to play. Adam was ordered to return home at the end of the week. He had obeyed. Sophie's summons to Miss Trotter's was part of the plot, and in the course of an hour's gossip the unsuspecting girl had bared her heart to the shrewd eyes behind the gold-rimmed spectacles. Barrow was a scion of the old lords of the valley, holding by right of blood a portion of a historic estate. He was *armiger*, and although a sarcastic college of heralds might now quarter upon his escutcheon a tinker's tools or a bundle of clothes pegs, yet the embattled portcullis that was the shield heritage derived from his mother made him a gentleman. So far as intrinsic womanhood was concerned, Sophie was without a flaw; but she was a peasant through twenty generations. Miss Trotter decided that Barrow owed the house he represented the debt of a "good" marriage; doubly he owed it, for it was due from him to do something to repair the *mésalliance* of his mother. There was yet a

work to be accomplished in the little world of the green valley. Miss Trotter hoped to do it; and as she really liked and admired Sophie she prayed that her schemes might not bring upon the gentle girl those pangs that time finds it so hard to heal.

She took her out into the garden to her niece, for she wished to see the two girls together. The keen old eyes noted the mutual embarrassment and antagonism that lay under the mask of politeness, so, when she had laden Sophie with flowers and sent her home under the escort of her own man-of-all-work, she placed her seat upon the lawn where she had a glimpse of Sheepdene House through the trees, and told Julia a story which she thought she ought to know. She began bluntly and without any preface.

"You remember we met Adam Stone hiding in Peterminster?"

"Hiding?"

"Well, he was hiding—lurking in a none too savoury lodging-house whilst the marks of a fight were fading from his face."

"Gipsies had attacked him."

"No, he had attacked half a gipsy."

Julia's attention changed suddenly from indifference to keenness. "Yes?" she asked.

"He fought Jasper Barrow. The prize of the

fight was the pretty body of Sophie Watkin; at least, so Adam intended."

The blood went from Julia's cheeks. "Has she told you so?"

"No; she knows nothing about it. You patched the hurts of one warrior. Did he tell you anything?"

"He owned there had been a fight, the outcome of a private feud. Had I known——"

"You would not have doctored him."

"I would not," was the angry rejoinder. "He should have told me; it was not honourable of him!"

"Confession would have been awkward."

"But it was my due!"

Miss Trotter sat up sharply. The grey eyes of her niece had a light in them that she had never seen before, and her whole body was quivering. "I think," she said quietly, "that you have a story to tell me. Mr. Barrow called on us that day and you talked with him some time at the gate before you brought him to me. I must confess that I wondered a little about it. Now I am puzzled. Why should you be in a position to claim anything as a right from him? Come, Julia, you must give me your confidence."

"I have a right to him; he has a right to me;

that was why I took him home, dressed his hurts, and sat with him until midnight. You should have asked me why I did that."

"My dear, I *am* asking, only you don't answer; you put an extra twist into the puzzle. Is it a serious tangle?"

"Mr. Barrow came to see me that day; he considered that he was betrothed to me."

Miss Trotter gasped and sat back in her chair staring at her niece. "Betrothed to you, and you had never seen him before! Julia, which of us is the mad woman? Don't talk in dreadful riddles any longer. What you say is impossible."

"No, it is true! Auntie, will you try to understand?"

"I am trying, but you don't help me; you bewilder me. You are as pale as a ghost. Sit down here. You *must* explain!"

Julia sat down. It was not easy to begin the fantastic tale. She had laughed at Jasper. He had gone away and bled for another maiden's sake. She had had that blood wet upon her hands, and to her it had appeared like a sealing of their superstitious compact. Lying awake that same night she had said to herself that she would go to him if he came again to claim her. Her excursion into the world had not broken down that purpose,

but her aunt's tale had shattered it to pieces. How could she tell the shrewd old lady the story of her folly! She *would* tell it and be ridiculed into common sense. She made the effort and began.

"Auntie, Mr. Barrow was here on Midsummer Eve."

"The day he came into the valley?"

"Yes; he sat here at supper after midnight. It was a feast I had prepared for—for a lover; you know the old superstition?"

"Yes; but that is a piece of heathenish nonsense, pagan moon worship, a foolish offshoot of the abominations of Astarte. You can forget that."

"I can't forget it!"

"Why?"

"Because I am pagan; he is pagan. I called for a lover. He came. Why did he come? He followed me. I let him in. He ate the feast, knelt to me and pledged fealty. I have given him a claim. In going to him that other night I acknowledged it; in my heart I acknowledged it. I can't forget!"

The old fingers came down gently upon the brown hair. "You are half in love with him."

"I hate him!" she cried fiercely; "he shed his blood for her; fought savagely; his face was

dreadful and the blood covered my hands." She shivered. "He has dishonoured me!"

"What did he say to you at the gate?"

"Words that make it impossible for me to forgive what he did afterwards. I went out after you had gone to bed because I knew he had not returned, and I hoped to meet him."

"Why?"

"I wanted him to plead with me, make love to me. He had not said he loved me. I wanted him to say it; meant that he should say it!" she exclaimed passionately. "Why should I not be loved?"

> "Chase love and it will flee;
> Flee love, and it will follow thee!"

said Miss Trotter enigmatically and rose up from her chair. "We must ask Jasper Barrow to supper to-morrow night."

Julia sprang up. "I will not meet him, auntie!"

"Then I shall be able to study him more at my leisure. Ah! they have just lighted the candles at Sheepdene."

CHAPTER XXI

TWO GO WALKING; ONE GOES RIDING

THE rustic comedy in which Miss Trotter was so cheerfully ready to assume her part as a grandmother fairy was a far more intricate tangle of plot and counterplot than she had imagined, for other fingers beside her own were busily weaving at the web. Even whilst she had talked with Sophie, Solomon and the gig had brought an unforeseen player by a devious entrance right on to the stage. For the moment her face was veiled, but the progress of the play would bring her her cue, and a group of tragi-comedy players would rush on when she disclosed herself. Jasper's mysterious visitor was come again. Matthew Beech had taken Sally Burdock to his heart and hearth, and Dick Burridge had put on the buskins and wrapped himself in a dark cloak.

For long, long weeks the master of Sheepdene had lived as a solitary under the magic of the moon herb, and the greater magic of the memory

of a maid. Now the maid was back again in the flesh, beautiful, alluring, beckoning from across the stream; he knew he was bound to go to her. And Adam was home also, morose and challenging, so that once more Sophie might be in need of a champion. The secret of the fateful evening upon the Beacon was known to Julia, and the knowledge revolted her; and she learned very quickly that the whispers were busy over another fair one at Sheepdene. She was resolved to resign her part in the Sheepdene comedy, for neither the plot nor the other players were according to her taste. Early in the morning she went off riding, determined for a while to leave the valley behind her.

And Jasper was already away along the lonely eastern hills behind Sheepdene and towards Pottersham. He walked bypaths and woodlands with the fair unknown deep in conversation. His promise to her that he would leave home when she came to the house had not been claimed for redemption. Instead of that she had urged him to remain and he had quickly assented. His desire to speak again with Julia was overmastering. Even as he walked with his companion the sense of the caressing touch of the other upon his bruised face was more real than the playful buffets of the morning breeze. There was no longer any

need to ask himself whether he loved; the passion that is a man's full desire for a maid was burning him and urging him to utterance.

Jasper was leaning over a stile gazing down upon the wooded hollow of Pottersham, the veiled lady seated at his elbow, when the peace of the shaded highway above them was broken by a terrific clattering of hoofs. Some bolting horse was tearing along in a mad racket of terror. Springing upon the stile Jasper saw that the runaway had turned into the lane that dropped to the village, and in another moment he recognized with a cry of horror that the horse was Julia's, and she, white-faced and conscious of her danger, was striving desperately to wrench the bit from the teeth of the terrified brute. The horse was taking the steep and dangerous way at a pace that could only mean broken limbs to itself and probable death to its rider.

It was a moment such as brings paralysis upon a man, and just for an instant Jasper felt bonds pressing his mind and limbs. Then he jumped into the roadway, scarcely hearing the cry of warning and alarm that came from the woman, who now saw what had happened, and realized the peril of the girl and the danger to any one who dared the attempt to save her. Jasper faced

round, alert and determined, and she remembered with a sob of thankfulness that he was gipsy-bred and a horse tamer by instinct and a life of practice.

In the few instants of time thoughts flashed like lightning streaks through Jasper's brain. Had Julia seen him? Why did she not cry out? How long had her strength and nerve been under the strain of that wild ride? Could she maintain her desperate pull upon the bridle until she reached the stile? A few seconds, and the hazard would be won or lost.

The runaway came along in a slithering gallop and was now less than twenty yards away. Jasper was poised for action. As the animal came abreast of him he sprang for its head, grabbed the bridle low down to the bit, and with a frantic wrench at the foaming mouth, brought the head across, the horse swinging in a clattering of stones and a whirl of dust and a wild effort to pull free that took Jasper off his feet and tugged his wrists almost to the point of dislocation. For a moment or two Jasper was in greater danger than Julia, the horse fighting viciously with its head and beating a mad tattoo in the air with its fore hoofs. But presently the bit went back into the mouth with a snap, and though the beast still reared and plunged the worst was over.

"Jump off if you can!" called Jasper, speaking to Julia for the first time. Heartened by his voice she dropped the bridle and tried to dismount, only to fall half fainting into the roadway. Then for an instant or two until Jasper could force him away she was in imminent danger from her horse's heels and he could spare no hand to help her. She scrambled trembling to the bank to find a woman's hand outstretched to help and a soothing, low-toned voice murmuring consolation into her ear. She just glanced up into the heavily veiled face, and then sat silent and quivering until the battle between man and horse should be over.

Julia found the struggle to retain consciousness a hard one, and despite her condition of collapse resented the supporting arm of the unknown woman. She clutched at the tall hedge grass whilst Jasper and the horse danced in a mist before her. She knew that she had been in peril of mutilation or death, and for the few minutes of the wild dash down the steep lane she had awaited the horror of the crash. Why did not Jasper let the horse go whither it would and come to her himself at once? She wanted the protection of his arm and the murmur of his voice. Once or twice his eyes met hers and she saw also that there was a message in them for the woman who hid

her face, and the scent of whose clothing stifled the natural odours of the hedgerow. Mysteriously he had answered her love charm, eaten, and then gone away, breaking the pledge of the feast; and the woman whose breath was upon her cheek was even then coming to him.

Just as mysteriously he now came to claim the debt of a life, yet he fought for the conquest of a half-maddened brute when her heart was ready to surrender at one clasp of his arms, one whispered "Come!" in her ears. Why should Fate link them so closely and the man not feel the subtle pull of the chain? Notwithstanding the presence of the woman she wanted to cry out to him, and bit her lips to keep back the words that strove to force an utterance. A few hours ago she had answered, "I hate him!" Now she ached for the question that would bring from her, "I love you! You have conquered."

His masterful spirit was bent upon subduing the horse; she saw it in the set of his mouth and the hard light that shone from his eyes. He succeeded. The gipsy in Barrow gave him that touch of horse magic that confers an almost uncanny power upon its possessor. The horse was reduced to a state of abject docility, standing untethered in the lane, only the twitching ears

and quickly dilating nostrils betraying its agitation. Then it was that Jasper came to her side. In reality she had not sat for more than three minutes, but so much emotion had pulsed through her that it seemed an age.

"You are not hurt?" he said.

"Thank you, no," she faltered. And the woman added, "But your nerves, my poor child, must have received a dreadful shock. Lean upon me." Julia stiffened herself and Barrow spoke again. "You are terribly pale; shall I carry you or lead you to one of the cottages?" There was concern enough in the voice, and more than that in the dark eyes had she but glanced up at them. Oh! if the other, the secret woman, were only not there. She could not answer. Jasper spoke again. "Let me carry you?" She thrilled at the thought of yielding herself helpless into his strong arms. "We might both help her along," said the soft voice of the woman, and the spell was broken. "I—I would rather rest here," cried Julia; then she gasped, "Some water, please!"

Jasper ran down the winding lane to the nearest house, and it was in the woman's arms that Julia swooned and lay helpless. She awoke to find Jasper kneeling at her feet, glass in hand, as he had done on Midsummer Eve, and she drank

from his hands. But the romance was gone. The maid ached for love, and listened to commonplaces of condolence into which only the woman put any terms of endearment. When she was fully recovered Jasper went back to the cottage and he led the horse with him. He was away nearly a quarter of an hour, and when he returned the horse followed quietly with no more than a finger upon the bridle. Julia stood up at the sounds of their coming. A little colour had stolen back into her cheeks.

She met him with outstretched hand; she spoke. "Mr. Barrow, I ought to have said this before. I owe you my life."

"No! no!" He took the proffered hand and held it and looked into the grey eyes. "I am glad I was here," he said, then added after a pause, "Perhaps you would have held him up after all."

Julia released her hand. "I owe you my life," she repeated. "I cannot thank you as I should; it is the time, but—but not the place. I can never repay what you have done, but I will remember. Please forgive me if I do not say more now. I will go home." She turned to her horse and stroked it; the animal winced and fidgeted, but a touch from Jasper's hand brought quietness. "There

is a swelling behind the ear," he said; "some insect must have stung him badly."

"I will lead him," answered Julia; but Jasper at once asserted the authority of the man and the rescuer. He turned to the woman. "You will forgive me for leaving you, won't you?" And the answer came quickly and ungrudgingly. "Of course I will. I can easily find the paths back to Sheepdene." Julia found her hands taken and pressed warmly, a last word of regret for her accident spoken, and then Jasper's arm was linked in hers firmly and supportingly, and they started down the strong slope to Pottersham. Once she turned; the woman stood at the stile watching them, and her veil was lifted at last. Julia had a glimpse of a fair face that matched the golden hair, whose tresses had already mingled with her own dark locks as they had sat together on the hedgerow bank. Another turn in the lane and they were close upon the first cottage of Pottersham. Neither had spoken a word. Julia now broke the spell of silence in a voice hardly above a whisper. "I think I can walk alone, now, Mr. Barrow."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite, and I would rather do so, please."

Jasper's eyes sought hers in quick inquiry, and she rapidly answered in words. "Do not take

what I say unkindly. I am more grateful than I can say, but aunt must not have alarming stories carried to her ears, and I have suffered no real hurt."

"I understand," said Jasper, and released her. They dropped to the pretty village street and ascended by the side of a dense wood to the main highway running back to Swainswick. A drover was coming towards them with a flock of sheep, and behind him jogged Aaron Giles, the wheelwright, in a farm wagon that he had repaired. They passed them, and Julia stopped. "I think Diamond is quite quiet now," she said.

"Quite," answered Jasper.

"Then I will ride, please. I would rather get home as quickly as possible."

"You are sure you do not feel nervous?"

"Diamond and I are old companions."

Jasper assisted her to mount. The horse was perfectly placid and went off at a walk, Jasper keeping at its head. Thus they proceeded for a quarter of a mile, both apparently intent upon the horse. Yet the maid at least trembled with desire for a press of the man's hand, a word from his lips that would break down the barrier of convention between them. And he burned with the desire to do these things and more. The wide highway

ran straight with nothing living in sight. He might have lifted her from the saddle and crushed her to his heart and none would have seen. But there was a black side to the Midsummer Magic, and she had denied its bond to his face. He sighed and walked along plunged in tormenting thought. The ridge of the Beacon peeped out from behind the trees. Sheepdene looked at them from the left across the valley. Julia suddenly looked down. "You will not say anything to my aunt," she said.

He looked up. "No."

"And the lady who was with you?"

"She is hardly likely to meet Miss Trotter—yet."

"Please ask her to forgive me for robbing her of your company."

"There is no need to ask that."

"But you will give my message?"

"Yes."

"Thank you; thank you for many, many things, Mr. Barrow. Will you excuse me if I ride on?"

"Of course, Miss Carden."

"Then good-morning. And do believe that I am grateful and very, very sorry for—oh! many things." She touched Diamond with the end of the bridle strap and cantered on without another

word. Jasper watched her as long as she was in sight, feeling like a man who had had a cup of happiness offered to him at a moment when his hands were chained so that he could not take it.

Julia rode quickly home and went at once to her room. There for an hour she sat with the perfume of the stranger woman in her nostrils, the sound of a low musical voice in her ears, and a vision of fair beauty only half revealed in her eyes. Jasper had not spoken the stranger's name. Why was he so secret in his ways? Why was there always another woman? Julia had been given a cup of bitterness, and in solitude she drank to the dregs.

She went downstairs sufficiently recovered to betray nothing to the sharp eyes of Miss Trotter. The latter looked up from her knitting. "I have sent to Jasper Barrow," she said. Julia replied with a mechanical "Yes."

"William took up my note."

"Yes."

"There is a visitor at Sheepdene. William saw her reading at the open window. I am afraid Jasper will not come down. I think I will go up and see the lady. William says she is very pretty."

"She is," said Julia.

Miss Trotter looked up, and her niece had gone pale. "You have seen her?" she cried.

"Yes."

"Very fair and blue-eyed?"

"I think so; she was heavily veiled."

"Veiled!"

"Another of Mr. Barrow's secrets."

"He seems to have plenty," said Miss Trotter, a little tartly.

Julia made no answer.

CHAPTER XXII

VISIONS AND THE FLESH

WARNED by her niece's manner, Miss Trotter paid no call at Sheepdene House. She thought it better that events should shape their own course for a while. Jasper came down to supper. A gipsy love of fine raiment and a man's proper pride in the youthful graces of his body sent him to this second feast with Julia immaculately clad. The night was gloriously starlit; there was not a cloud, but he did not know that the shadows of the hands of two women now lay over him so that the maid would only see him darkly; and both shadows were from the light of the midsummer moon.

Julia, having no heart for the meeting, resolutely put aside every trinket and scrap of finery and appeared dressed with the severest simplicity, but this only set off her natural beauty to the greater advantage and made the appeal of her charms irresistible. Where she intended to chill she fanned a fire, but the fires did not burn her that night.

With genial old age to preside, and youth and beauty to grace the table, the little supper should have proved a succession of happy moments. It went down in the records of all three as a dull, even painful affair. Julia was suffering from the shock of the morning and harassed in mind concerning Jasper. She was angry with him for his coldness, and still more bitterly angry with herself for the hot yearnings that had surged up in her own heart. She had gone from him into the world, but had returned acutely conscious that he held her his captive. Yet he claimed nothing, asked for nothing. She was holding out the greatest of all gifts with both hands, but he could not, would not see; or if he saw he would not take, and Julia realized the shadowy fingers that held him back. She shrank into a cold reserve that the others could not break.

Jasper was puzzled, and it seemed almost impossible that they two could so recently have lived through those fateful moments in Pottersham lane. Miss Trotter, knowing something of what was in her niece's mind, resolved to retire and leave the two young people together for a while. Whilst Jasper stood talking with her for a moment or two, Julia sought relief for the tension of her mind by stepping out into the solitude of the night.

As she opened the door, a woman, wrapped in a light cloak, her fair hair uncovered, passed slowly by the gate. A quick pang shot through the girl's heart, for the stranger could be none other than Jasper's guest. The latter paused for an instant and turned, then went on. A few yards farther and the footfalls ceased. Julia walked along to the other end of the lawn. She waited, and the woman came back again and stopped on the bridge.

Nerving herself Julia went indoors. Her aunt was gone, and Jasper stood in the hall, uncertain whether to say "good-night" or not. The pallor of the girl's face startled him. He came forward. "Miss Carden, you are ill!" he exclaimed.

"It has been a trying day," she answered.

"I am very sorry; can I——"

"You can do nothing, thank you." He looked into the grey eyes; they were hard at last.

Once again he began to express his regrets, but her ears were deaf to the ring of sincere anxiety and undertones of affection in his voice. She stood almost heedless of what he was saying, and rebuffed by her unresponsiveness, he stretched out his hand for his hat. The light was on her face; there was none in her eyes for him. "Good-night!" he said.

"Good-night!" she answered, and her eyes were turned away whilst a shiver went through her. Jasper still stood, struggling with a wild desire to take her in his arms. How could she forget the bond he acknowledged and the seal that had been put upon it that morning? He had come down to say a thing and he would say it. He took a step that brought him to her side. "Miss Carden—Julia, what is wrong? Won't you——"

She stopped him with a gesture. "Mr. Barrow," she cried, speaking rapidly but in a tone that none could overhear, "so much has already passed between us that the plainest of plain speaking is best. For this morning, let me thank you once again. I shall never forget it, and for much that happened in those moments I shall honour you and forgive you the rest."

"Forgive!" the word came out with a gasp.

Julia faced him swiftly. "Yes, forgive. You came here and offered me—if not love—at least marriage. Why did you go away with those words warm on your lips and fight Adam Stone for the right to take Sophie Watkin? Why did you allow me to dress the wounds you had got for her sake? Did you think that I tended you that night and stayed with you out of pure neigh-

bourliness? Could you not see that I recognized that there was some bond between us?"

"And is there not?" he asked hurriedly.

Julia faced him again. "There is the barrier of many secrets. You will not trust, and I cannot." Jasper tried to take her hand, but she drew back.

"Shall I try to explain?" he asked.

"Is it not too late when she is waiting in the lane for you?"

Jasper suddenly remembered his guest. "Waiting for me!" he echoed.

"Yes," she answered. "Already we have kept you too long." She stood aside for him to pass. He remained, his tongue burning to explain. Julia watched him, divined the struggle, and prayed that he would speak at last and trust her with all.

He decided to be silent; it was too early to betray the other woman's secret. He bowed, took up his hat again, and went to the door. He turned for one last look. Julia stood, clad in her simple white, her face and bust like carven marble surmounted by dark waves of living hair. "Good-night!" he said quietly, and walked away. His hand was on the gate when he heard the door shut and the bolts shot into the staple. "I will open

them again!" he muttered, and stepped into the lane. His guest came smiling to him from the bridge. He met her with a smile equally frank. The woman looked at him and thought how well his dark handsomeness befitted the night. "I heard the door opened and wondered whether you were leaving, so I waited," said she.

"Yes," answered Jasper.

"The night is so beautiful, and I am, as yet, almost a prisoner by day, doomed to look through bars upon familiar scenes; do you mind if we walk a little?" she asked, and there was appeal in the eyes as well as the voice.

"It will be a pleasure," replied Jasper; "I should not have left you; you are my guest." He offered his arm. She took it. "I feel an intruder," she murmured.

"And I acknowledge your claims and your privileges. Where shall we go?"

"Would it be too far to walk through the wood and on to the ridge of the hill?"

For answer Jasper pulled her a little closer to himself and started off up the rise of the lane, at the top of which he had met Julia on the night of his fight with Adam. They passed Sheepdene House, turned into a field path, and were soon threading the green alleys that were the ways

through the beeches. It was almost dark in the woodlands, but the ways were wide and both knew them. Newly fallen leaves rustled crisply where they trod, and here and there a long root ran across the track, making a snare for the feet and causing the woman to cling more tightly to her companion. She chatted lightly and confidingly, her whole bearing showing the esteem in which she held Jasper; it was mightily soothing to his wounded pride.

They were almost out of the trees when the sound of heavy footsteps descending came to their ears. The woman's chatter ceased instantly, and Jasper felt her tremble upon his arm. He recognized nothing save the long, slipping stride of a heavy person walking rapidly down-hill; to the other the footfalls were an echo out of her past life, and she knew that the ponderous bulk of her husband would presently loom up out of the darkness. She loosened her hold upon Jasper's arm, but the next moment impetuously linked hers with it again. Matthew Beech appeared; there was room for all to pass, but the woman halted by a patch of undergrowth, and Jasper obeyed the promptings of her touch and stood also.

Beech was abreast of him, but did not notice the dark-clad figure. The light cloak, pale face,

and flaxen hair of the woman revealed her dimly, so that she might have been a ghost amidst the trees. Vaguely Beech saw her, turned his head, and stared. An exclamation only half articulate and with fear tinging it burst from his lips. He stopped; the figure stood motionless, returning his stare with an unwinking fixity. He swung round to the path again, running at a dangerous pace.

The two listened until the plunging footsteps died away in the far darkness. The woman shivered. "I did not want to meet him like that," she whispered. Jasper nodded, for the episode had stirred him unpleasantly. "He took me for a wraith," she continued; "he will dream."

"Ten years, is it?" asked Jasper. "You will have changed in that time."

"Yet he knew me—at once. We often walked this path," she added after a pause.

"We will turn back, then," said Jasper.

But she held him. "Let us go on," she cried. They cleared the wood and came out on to the open hill, walked to a treeless scarp covered with short turf, and descended to the road. Ten o'clock rang out from the stable clock of Sheepdene House.

Beyond the hedge where they stood lay the grounds of Matthew Beech, acres belonging to the

woman who now looked down upon them as they lay a dark smudge under the stars. She began to see visions herself. A little way down the lane they came to a gate that led through one grass-ground to the farmhouse. Helen Beech stayed again. Lights still shone out from the window. Their attraction was irresistible. Beech had had plenty of time to reach home. The wife turned quickly to Jasper and there was a panting in her breathing. "I must take one look; will you wait?" she whispered.

"Yes," he answered, "if——"

"I must. It is my house, my home, my man; surely I may look in upon him!"

"I will wait." Jasper opened the badly hung gate, and Helen Beech went quickly and silently along the path until she disappeared in the darkness. Barrow leaned over, watching and waiting. He knew that Jane had written in her crabbed old hand and with a host of misspellings the story of Sally Burdock, and the letter had brought back the wife, resolved to prevent the desecration of the hearth she had forsaken, or cleanse it if the pollution had already been accomplished. She had no present intention of returning to her home, so her action was logical only after the manner of women; she would not, and another woman should not.

Jasper, musing over the gate, had plenty of food for reflection. He knew what his swarthy cousins, the passionate daughters of tent and caravan, would do, and he wondered at the cool, calculated behaviour of the fair-skinned women he was meeting. Was he equally far apart from the men amongst whom he had come to dwell? Or were men more of a pattern and the colour of their skins a mere accident that had no effect upon their inner selves? Adam Stone had fought and Jasper justified him. A gipsy wife would have headed a savage band, descended upon Sally with the swiftness of a tempest, and left no part of her comeliness unmarked or unmarred. How was it that a woman like Helen Beech could plan, and watch, and wait upon circumstance? Were love and hate and passion merely a matter of colouring amongst women—skin-deep and nothing more? He had seen the woman dishevelled with the storm, bowed down by trouble, and her blue eyes ringed with sadness, and she had impressed him with a sense of tragic beauty. Now she was come in another guise, clothed in the delicacies and fripperies of a gentlewoman; her eyes were bluer without the tears, her hair more of a mesh to ensnare a man's heart than when the rain had flattened it and robbed it of its lustre. How could

such an one allow a rustic trollop to sit for one moment in her place or usurp authority under a roof that was absolutely and entirely her own, the man sheltering beneath it only on sufferance? The gipsy in Barrow made it impossible for him to understand.

His thoughts strayed down to another house, the quaintly gabled and dormered pile where dwelt Julia Carden. He understood her better; she could be fiercely jealous of her rights even when she refused to take them. Had he done her a wrong? He asked himself the question and answered "No!" He had done battle for his own honour as well as Sophie's. He was sheltering a runaway wife, and the husband had pledged him friendship. His answer to that was that he was fulfilling an obligation that came to him with Sheepdene itself; he would never repudiate it. In so many words, Julia had acknowledged that she recognized the bond of the love-feast. She had slammed and barred a door against him; her hands—repentant—must open it again. There was a battle to be waged; he stretched himself to his full height and rejoiced in it.

Helen Beech suddenly reappeared running.

"Quick!" she whispered; "he may follow, for he saw my face unmistakably this time."

"In the open?"

"No; he and the woman were seated at the table playing cards. I looked through the window."

"And if he should follow?"

"I will face him alone." They went rapidly down the lane listening for sounds of pursuing footsteps. None came.

. . . . . .

Matthew Beech had seen the vision, dimly in the woods and again like a wraith at the window; and to him it was a vision only, not a reality. He was no dreamer, and because he knew his own obesity of mind as well as of body he glanced down at his swollen legs and examined the big hands that trembled with the weight, as it were, of half a dozen flimsy cards. The years had gone over him with hard, shaping fingers. He had changed rapidly and markedly. The vision had come out of the past bringing him the ghost of a figure, young and shapely, clear sky-blue eyes, and hair that would make drab the corn yellowing in his fields. It was the picture of what she had been, not what she was; therefore it was a vision. Why had it come? Why should his heavy-lidded eyes see such things? He threw the cards down.

Sally was watching him and had been watching intently all the evening. She had donned for a first time some of the finery from Peterminster and looked the better for it. She was rosy, vital, buxom, alluring; yet Matthew had been absent-minded, almost empty, of the rough, plain-spoken compliments she had expected. Sally had dressed for her man, stinting nothing in the display of her physical charms; she had anticipated the rough fondlings of her amarous bear, and had gained nothing.

"What be the matter wi' 'ee?" she asked; "dreamy as an old owl, ye be."

Matthew looked up. "I be tired."

"That all? Tiredness do make a man yawn; it doan't make 'un think. Out wi' it; what's the matter?"

"I've seen *her*, Sally."

Sally snorted. "And can't 'ee see I?"

"I do; but t'other's a dream."

Sally stared at him; the podgy face was working. "I dreamed of a new dress; I've got 'un; and he's better than the dream."

"You don't understand."

"Doan't I?"

"I had her, Sally; she was my wife."

"Ay."

"And between a man and wife—but you don't understand."

"Doan't I?" said Sally again. She gathered up the cards, and there was no trembling in her hands. She put them away, drew down the blind, and picked up the candle. For a moment she stood; then put her hand on his shoulder. "I be goin' to bed; come!"

Matthew looked up, and she met his eyes with a look full of meaning. "I be goin' to make 'ee fresh dreams," she said. "And Ann will go in the morning. Come!"

The man stood up and shook himself. He laughed, then kissed her. Sally was full mistress of her man.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE VISION EMBODIED

MRS. GOSLING, her round, cheery old face framed by a flapping sunbonnet, was clattering in pattens across the yard with a basket of warm brown eggs upon her arm. The morning was heavy along the hills, and in the valley was a drenching mist that awaited the myriad fingers of the sun to send it vaporously heavenward. Job Woodyatt slouched leisurely through the gate. "Marnen', ma'am!" said he.

"Marnen' to 'ee, carter," answered Jane. The two walked to the kitchen door without exchanging another word. Arrived at this point Job jerked his head in the direction of Beech's farm. "Ann be goin'!"

"Ay," said Jane, and sighed.

"Whatever ther' was to do between Sally and farmer have been done at last. Both on 'em be goin' to Hillborough Market today to brazen it out in the face o' the world. I

count folks will find plenty of excuses for farmer."

"I count," said Jane.

"And Sally's a bouncin' wench with a good name up to now." Jane put down her eggs. Job leaned against the door post. "If 'twas me own darter I doan't know as I should say much. She'll play fair with 'un, and as for farmer, well, he's got to that soft time o' life——"

"When 'tis easy to be made a fool of," snapped Mrs. Gosling.

Job shifted on to another leg. "As to that, ma'am, Sally's honest and have got a bit o' pride. I bain't a man of rash judgments, and I go so far as to say that I reckon farmer might ha' done worse. Through church door first and house door afterwards be the proper road, but if church door's barred, well, ther' ye be; 'tis either stop outside in the cold or go and warm by the man's fire without axin' the parson's leave." Job stood in thought a minute longer. "I reckon he'll find a tidy bit o' comfort in Sally."

"And she more nettles than feathers in her bed. Draw yourself a cup of ale, carter. I must be seein' to breakfast."

"Thank 'ee, ma'am," said Job, and proceeded to the ale barrel. Ellen Cobb came in. "Fine

tellin's for folks' ears thease marnen'," she exclaimed with a snort.

"Ay," said Job, "and fine tellin's all day. If clothes was character Sally wouldn't have a rag to stand up in by tonight."

"The trollop!"

Job finished his ale and wiped his mouth.

"There's some as'll clack the loudest today would have gone Sally's road without standin' to think quite so long at the turning."

"Meanin' me?" flamed Ellen.

"Meanin' nobody in particular," said Job, and went to load up for market himself. Ellen turned to Jane. "What be you goin' to do?" she asked.

"Take her up a cup of tea and tell her."

Ellen got down a cup and saucer from the dresser. "Reckon she've brought back her face to the fair a day after the hirin' was over. Sally will hold 'un to his word, leastways for a bit."

"Ther's more'n one bargain in farmer's markutin', and maybe the silly wench will be glad enough to cry off wi' hers," said Jane.

"Ye doan't say so!" Ellen stood, arms akimbo, awaiting further disclosures; they were not forthcoming. Jane went upstairs with the tea and tidings. She found her guest awake and smiling. Helen Beech had had dreams, and in them, her

husband, stricken by the vision of her face, had repented of his folly before it reached unforgivable extremes. So Jane, unwilling to wound before the thrust was inevitable, wished her a cheery good-morning, but hurried from the room without her accustomed few minutes' gossip. During breakfast, which Jasper took with his guest, the sun broke out, sweeping the mists from the hills and making a mirror of every shimmering drop in the valley. Jane listened for her master to leave the room when the meal was over and then came in. Helen Beech stood by the window.

"It'll be wunnerful clear presently," said the old woman.

"It will be beautiful!" exclaimed the other warmly, her head erect, her brain full of conscious faith in the visions that had floated above her pillow.

"'Tis a marnen' for seein'."

"I love the view!"

"An' the road windin' down to bottom and up again makes the housen seem neighbourly to one another, doan't it?"

Helen Beech turned, and the light in her blue eyes and the sunshine streaming over her fair hair made her look really handsome. "That's a pretty thought, Jane. The old road is like a long

arm going from us to Swainswick to offer the folks a 'good-morning!'"

"Hillborough market, too, ma'am. Ther'll be plenty a-drivin', come presently. You might see he go along."

"Mr. Barrow?"

Jane gave the woman a quick and jealous look. "T'other' un!" she answered, picked up the tray, and went out. Ellen Cobb came to take away the cloth. The woman at the window fell to musing; her old friend's mood was unusual. She drew up one of the high-backed but comfortable chairs and watched the road for the big body of her husband. She wanted to see him, see his face clearly and distinctly, so that she might measure him and compare him with what he had been. As he had said to Sally Burdock so she now said to herself—there is a link forged between man and maid in marriage that time cannot wear out nor the bitterest quarrel snap wholly asunder; "one flesh" expresses a natural truth that cynicism and sophism are powerless to destroy. And with her the "one flesh" had lived, breathed upon her bosom, died there, and yet was alive in her heart. She had no desire to go back to her husband; she even shrunk from the serious contemplation of such a step; but he was hers, as she was his. She felt

that no temptation could be strong enough to lead her to bring a stain upon his name, and she would have no Sally Burdock polluting her hearth. Rather than that she would stifle her physical and mental repugnance and go back to be a wife again. And so she desired to see him, to look into his face, to put her old affection and her present aversion to the test and know herself. For nearly an hour she watched every moving figure along the road, and all save the stooping shape of old Sol proved strange to her. Upstairs Jane was watching also, for she wanted to be sure that the wife saw what she meant she should see.

When Sally took the last irrevocable step which bound her life with that of Matthew Beech she also resolved that there should be no half measures on the part of the man. Already she had proved her household worth and shown that she was not without value as a cheery and good-tempered companion; if she gave she would also get; the bargain was congenial to both; it must not be one-sided. It was Sally who suggested the trip to Hillborough market. Beech stroked his chin dubiously over the proposal, but the spirit of the woman roused him. "If I can put up with what their tongues do say I can also bear all their faces do show. You do want I, I do want you. I bain't

ashamed of havin' 'ee this way since ther's no other. They'll stop clackin' when they do find we doan't mind it, so let us go to Hillborough."

"We'll go," he replied.

Sally literally scrubbed herself; she did her hair as becomingly as she knew how, and she dressed and re-dressed from her assortment of fine clothing until the man signified approval. She had youth and rustic comeliness on her side and made a brave show seated in the gig. "I bain't goin' to shame 'ee, my dear!" she exclaimed, and Beech expressed his certainty of that fact by a round oath and a defiant chuckle. If he had to flout his neighbours he could also show them a passable excuse.

But all these preparations consumed time, and Jane was almost beginning to think that Sally's boldness had failed when she espied the gig coming to a halt at Barrow's gate. Sally took the reins and Beech stepped out. The old woman's heart stood still. Was he coming to the house? She turned from the window and hurried downstairs to answer his knock and keep him at all costs from the dining parlour. The windows of this room faced down the hill across the lawn and gardens, and the woman would not see him. Jane had to descend by the servants' staircase, and Beech's big strides brought him to the front door before

she reached the hall. The door stood open, so he just gave a courtesy rap with his knuckles, entered, and turned straight into the dining-room, where he expected to find Jasper. A woman sprang up with a cry, and he found himself facing his wife!

Jane panted in to find them staring speechless at one another. The predominant emotion on either face was that of horror. To the wife's eyes the coarseness that had driven her from the man had deepened immeasurably; and he remembered that the other woman sat bedecked and defiant at the gate.

Beech was the first to regain control. He took out a big red handkerchief and wiped his face, covering his eyes for an instant from that which confronted him.

"So I really saw you last night," he stammered.

"Twice!" she replied, the word dropping almost without volition from her white lips.

"Twice!" he echoed, and stopped, looking round the room, at Jane, and lastly upon his wife. She clutched at the table for support. The blue eyes were round and staring, and her mind looking out of them clear and unmistakable. What he read in them aroused him to an anger that he strove for the moment to keep out of his voice. "Why have you come here?" he asked.

"To save you from taking a worse step than the one I took."

"How?" Beech's tone was challenging, defiant of the look in her eyes. The answer came low and clear. "I meant to come home again rather than have another woman in my house."

The flicker of a grin went across the man's mouth, and the wife winced; he was taking her return as a triumph for himself.

"How long have you been here?"

"Two days"; then she added, as though by an afterthought—"this time."

"This time?"

"I have been here each year on a certain day; there is no need to tell you which day."

Suspicion gleamed from the man's eyes. "This year?" he cried harshly. "I was here too!" He stepped forward, took her by the shoulders, and leered into her face. "By God! madam, you have preserved your beauty better than I have done. Were you here on Midsummer Eve for another victim?" The insinuation could not be mistaken, and with a cry of loathing the wife shook herself free and went to Jane's side. Beech followed her. "I was telling our love story to the dark-eyed devil who was hiding you!" he sneered.

This was an attack upon Jasper, and Helen

Beech roused to his defence. "I was not here, then."

"But you came; you stayed!"

"I stayed; the storm made anything else impossible."

"You came alone?"

"Yes. I always came alone. I did not know Miss Merrett was dead."

"Why did you not come to me for shelter?"

"There was no need!" Beech knew what meaning was hidden in the words.

"I had not chosen your successor, eh?" he cried.

"No."

The farmer straightened himself with a heave of his big shoulders, and a laugh gurgled in his throat. "But I have chosen her now," he exclaimed. "She's there, giving what you refused. And she stays!"

The wife stretched out her hand in appeal. "Think it over, Matthew!" The sound of the half-forgotten voice speaking the old familiar name sent a momentary thrill through him, and he stepped quickly to the door as though to get away from it. He felt that his heart was beating a tattoo upon his own words to Sally—"A wife is a wife."

He drowned it with a fierce repetition of "She stays! she stays!"

He went out and rejoined Sally, telling her nothing. They drove down the hill in silence. One of Sally's saving graces was intuition and she knew that something serious had happened. "You've never been quarrelling with Squire Barrow?" she asked.

"Not yet," was the short answer.

"But you be goin' to?"

"I be."

"About me?"

He turned upon her with an unpleasant grin on his red face. "About women," he said, and would answer no more questions.

All the way to Hillborough he brooded, nursing a quickly growing jealousy of his neighbour. Sally's journey of triumph and defiance fell flat, and at Hillborough Matthew drank heavily in more than one alehouse.

CHAPTER XXIV

TRAINS ARE LAID

FOR two days events smouldered underneath certain roofs in Sheepdene and Swainswick without bursting into flame; then puffs of angry wind came in from several quarters and set the whole valley ablaze.

Having met her husband face to face, Helen Beech no longer remained a ghost and a secret at Sheepdene House. She did not go openly into the village, and her identity—unless Matthew disclosed it—was known only to three members of Jasper's household, but she no longer sat within doors waiting for nightfall. Her husband saw her a dozen times in the gardens and home grounds, and too often for the farmer's peace of mind his young neighbour walked with her; the wife knew that she was watched, and for that reason showed herself with an exasperating frequency. Beech said nothing to Sally. The sight of his wife was a sore temptation, and he was

striving to make up his mind what to do. Sally saw also, and she understood that a certain vision had been flesh after all; she gave Beech no hint of what she guessed, but she fought skilfully for her own hand and helped him to make up his mind. In her turn Sally was watched by two malevolent eyes. Dick Burridge had given up work for a season. Sally never gave him a thought; she was never out of his mind and seldom far out of his sight.

Sheepdene lawns and gardens were plainly visible from the old house on the other side of the stream, and the sights that inflamed the heart of Matthew Beech brought many a throb of pain and anger to agitate the bosom of Julia Carden. She had dismissed Jasper from her presence, but she could not drive him from her thoughts; for good or evil the spell of the feast and his manhood held her. It is not an easy thing for a maid to owe her life to a man. Miss Trotter saw also and wondered. Why had Jasper said nothing about his visitor? To her old eyes the beautifully dressed figure so often by Barrow's side moved with grace and seeming youth. She was not pleased that the young gentleman she had purposed mothering should be secretive in so delicate a matter. And she had heard rumours of a mysterious lady at

Sheepdene immediately after Jasper's arrival. She was inclined to agree with her niece that there was plenty of gipsy darkness clouding their new neighbour, and she began to fear that her niece had given a heart where no equal gift was possible.

As one who possessed, but whose holding was threatened, Sally Burdock was the busiest of all those whose fates were so curiously interlinked by the working—or mis-working—of the Midsummer Magic. She had made her sacrifice for her man, and she meant to keep him. Sally had no skill in the arts of cajolery, so she resorted to no tricks and practised no affectations. A woman of the soil, she had that strong earth sense that taught her the rude realities of her attractions and also her limitations. She knew what sort of man appealed to her and why she responded to the appeal. She had native wit enough to judge the whole type of which Beech was a specimen, and she judged him with unerring shrewdness. She saw herself with his eyes, and she knew exactly what she was to him; the knowledge was not a romance, but it was practical common sense.

Sally did not sulk over what happened at Hillborough, nor did the moroseness of the next day interfere with her cheerfulness; there was a smile ready for the man, and a table well spread with

dainties for every meal. Beech went to the ale barrel oftener than Sally had ever known him to do. She rose early each morning and left him to sleep off his potations. When in due time he appeared in the kitchen the place was symbolical of the woman—clean, comforting, fresh as though a breeze moved about it, and he felt himself to be somehow stale and sour in comparison. On the third morning he went to the pump in the yard and had another wash.

When he appeared the breakfast was laid, and Sally—not without dignity—seated and waiting. The coffee and bacon were aromatic, and the fried eggs like old gold bosses on shields of ivory; the bread was brown and sweet, and the linen cloth fresh from the chest and redolent of lavender. Sally was spotless, good-humoured, and nodded a smiling "good-morning!" Beech made as though he would sit down, altered his mind, went round the table and kissed her. Sally returned it and then pushed him away to his place.

In thought Beech went back over many weary years of breakfasts in the roomy old kitchen, breakfasts when he had eaten alone of poorly-cooked food or sat watching old Ann Thomas chewing with toothless gums. He looked up at Sally's strong white teeth and apple-red cheeks

and sighed with thankfulness. He recalled breakfasts in the parlour at which his wife had officiated after a higher social fashion; and he remembered bickerings, quarrels, oaths, floods of tears, and gloomy silences. His eyes sought Sally's face again and she gave him an encouraging smile. He finished his meal nursing her amorously upon his knee. Sally's strapping animal comeliness had suffered from the shock of comparison with the higher beauty of the wife; she boldly played her attractions off against those of her rival and was winning. Beech wanted comfort, ease, uxoriousness, and Sally gave all without stint. Once again he swore an oath to stick to her. He meant to keep it.

It was the woman who cut short the period of morning dalliance, sending the man to his duties whilst she went singing about her own. Beech did not carry an untroubled mind with him on his walk through his grounds; he felt that he was a tenant whose lease was threatened. The presence of his wife in Sheepdene was the threat, and it was likewise a challenge against his fealty to the other woman. He had no desire to be tempted. He cursed her beauty and the thrills it re-awakened in him, and he was bitterly jealous of Jasper at whose table she sat. The whole situation was intolerable

and he burned to end it. He had threatened a reckoning with Jasper; the threat was as yet unfulfilled, and the wife who had scorned him could taunt him with cowardice. He would delay no longer.

First of all he did a wise thing; he went back to Sally and told her all. She watched him closely, knowing how her own fate was hanging in the balance, and when his story was finished she asked him quietly, "What be you a-goin' to do, Matthew?"

Beech looked up, and the strong, stolid face heartened him. For a moment his eyes looked steadily into hers. "What do you think, Sally?" he asked.

"Your answer first," she replied.

"I'll stick to you, my dear," he said a little huskily.

Sally smiled. "That settles it, then. Is there anything else I ought to know?"

"The farm is hers."

"I know that."

"She'll turn us out."

"Reckon she will; so should I!"

"You know what that means?"

"Work, my dear, and I bain't afraid of it," was the cheerful response. "Be you?"

Beech stretched out his hand. "You love me, Sally?"

She looked him clear in the eyes again. "I be fond of you, Matthew, and I'll work for you. Things have happened between us that makes me want to keep you. Tell the woman we're goin'. She wants 'ee because I've got 'ee. 'Tis my face, not yourn, that have brought her to Sheepdene. Mind you, I'll only have you of your own free will. Reckon I bain't altogether spoiled for markut."

A twinge of jealousy stirred in Beech. Others might not say "No!" to a chance of Sally. "I thought of going up to Sheepdene and having things out," he said.

"Squire Barrow?"

"Yes."

Sally wound an arm about him. "He doan't want your woman, and I like 'im for givin' her shelter. You get off to Peterminster for the rest of the day. Ther's many a better thing you might be doin' ther'. See what farms be goin'."

"Suppose she should come to you?"

"She'll come right enough, and you had better be away."

Beech thought the matter over and looked at the clock. "I'll go," he said.

"And come home sober?"

"Ay."

"Ther's no need to go drinkin'."

"None."

"Then get back afore dark. I reckon I shall want 'ee a bit after seein' her."

"She may not come."

"She will." Sally kissed him twice. He straightened himself with decision and went and saddled his horse. Riding past Sheepdene House he caught sight of his wife walking in the garden with old Jane. Both looked up, and his heart leapt. Sally was doing wisely in sending him away from temptation.

Just as he was entering into Swainswick Beech met something that almost decided him to turn home again. Two gipsies passed him on horseback, and one of them led a beautiful bay mare. The one horseman was tall, gaunt, and brown-faced, grizzled with the frosts of three-score years, but with a pair of black eyes that flashed with the fire of a perennial youth. There was no mistaking the figure in the blue coat, brass buttons, and flapeared cap. Beech was face to face with an old rival in the tilting lists of love. The wrinkled, hawk face was that of the gipsy chieftain, Jasper's father. Recognition was mutual, and the gipsy waved a long, delicate brown

hand with a cry, "Top o' the morning to you, farmer!"

"Damn!" answered Beech, his eyes upon the mare, and the new lady's saddle on her back. His thoughts flew to his wife. She was the only lady at Sheepdene House. He brought his horse to a standstill; but finally went his way to Peterminster.

Two hours later Julia Carden was picking off the dead blossoms in the borders that ran along the path to the gate. She had heard that two gipsies had ridden along towards Sheepdene House and had wondered whether the squire would welcome these visitors from the scenes of his past life. Suddenly she looked up to find the old gipsy at the gate and afoot with the horse he had been leading. His restless eyes were travelling along every line of her face and figure. She rose from her knees with the intention of going into the house until he passed by.

To her surprise and annoyance he called to her, "Pretty lady, I would like a word with you!" The tone was low and secretive, startling her far more than a shout would have done. The face was smiling and reassuring, and after a moment's hesitation she walked to the gate.

"Well?" she said.

The smile broadened to a grin of wide apprecia-

tion. "I need not ask if you are Miss Carden; only you could be you, and you are lovely." The gipsy cap came with a sweep from the mop of greying hair, and Julia's face flushed crimson at the abrupt boldness of the compliment. Not a word of answer or protest would come to her lips. "My name is Barrow, and I come from my son; will you honour me by lifting the latch of your gate?" Julia stared and felt she must be staring stupidly, but her hand went to the latch, and the gate was opened.

The gipsy hitched the halter to the railing and stepped in, his garish appearance contrasting oddly with the English comeliness of the girl and the summer simplicity of her dress. Julia found her voice. "Do you wish to see me?"

"I have travelled for weeks to see you and my son. I am happy. Some said that my son would not welcome me, seeing that he had forsaken our tents, but he kissed me, and I am content. I hoped for you, pretty lady. I knew my boy would love amongst his mother's people, so I brought along a present for the bride."

Julia gasped in dismay, but the tawny smiling face and bright appraising eyes fascinated her and rendered her dumb for a second time. The old man's voice sing-songed on like an incantation.

"I felt that you would be beautiful; you are. His mother was beautiful too, but I will say it even though she should hear it—you are lovelier than she was. But that is right, for I was never so handsome as my son. Now let me show you!" With a quick turn he was in the lane again and had the mare unhitched. There was a shrill "Yoick! Ho! Ho!" and mare and man were flying up the lane, a sudden rearing halt, a swift turn, and they dashed down again. The halter was slipped off, a signal given, and the mare sprang off alone; a shrill whistle and she stopped, swung round, and came back pulling up by his side. He walked to the gate, the beautiful creature following. "I bred her and trained her myself, pretty lady; there is not a better in England. Do you love horses?"

"I do!" cried Julia emphatically, and her eyes shone with admiration. "But——"

"See here!" he interrupted. He turned to the mare. "Come, Beauty, put your head there." He laid a hand light and caressingly on Julia's shoulder, and instantly Beauty's sleek nose was nuzzling affectionately amongst the muslin frills. Barrow patted the arching neck. "Love her, my dear; it is the handsome mistress I have told you of." The mare whinnied, and the soft nose

touched Julia's cheek. The girl had a moment of heartache. She loved a good horse; this one surely was matchless. But it could never be hers, for to accept it was to bind herself to Jasper, and this, she said to herself, "I will not do!" The old man broke in upon her thoughts. "I could sell her to-morrow for five hundred guineas."

"Then sell her, please; I cannot accept your gift," cried Julia, backing from the mare's caresses. The gipsy shook his head. "I would rather carry away a smile from you, my pretty one, than bags of gold. Besides, she was for you from the beginning. She will love you and you will love her, just as my son loves you and you love him."

"But I do not love Mr. Barrow!" protested Julia; "it is impossible, impossible!"

The man smiled. "I loved a Gorgio girl. It is hard to get them to say they love you. With a gipsy lass it is not so; she will tell you as soon as you make her heart throb. We are one nation and you are another, but I understand both."

The situation was becoming desperate and Julia was determined to end it. Beating her foot impatiently upon the path she cried, "I am telling you a plain truth, sir; I do not love your son; he does not love me. I cannot take your gift. Don't you understand?"

The gipsy's brow clouded a little, and he looked the maid in the eyes wistfully, searchingly. Her glance fell, and the old man laughed softly. "There is a bay mare in your fortune, pretty lady; I will put Beauty in the stable. Will you tell your aunt that Gipsy Barrow is here and would like to speak to her?" He turned away, and Julia went indoors, seeing some hope of rescue by the hands of her aunt.

None came, for when, a long while afterwards, old Barrow went up the hill again, he led no horse behind him.

CHAPTER XXV

THE TWO WOMEN

WHEN Gipsy Barrow went down with his tribal gift to the bride-elect—as he insisted she must be—Helen Beech turned her steps to her old home. She did not know whether her husband had returned, but she ached with a painful curiosity to see the woman who had taken the place she had left empty.

Sally was watching from an upper window and saw her the moment she entered the field gate. She came down, threw the front door open and then busied herself in the kitchen; it was no part of her plans to be caught lounging in idleness; she was scrupulously tidy, but she meant to be discovered playing the housewife.

Helen Beech reached the house. The walk across her own lands had cost her more effort than she had anticipated, and her heart was beating wildly and her knees trembling when at last she stood beneath the porch. There were plenty of

signs of recent cleaning, trimming, and repairing of house and fences and gardens, and she could estimate from what havoc Sally was redeeming the place. For a minute or two she stood, unable to raise her hand to knock at the door, and hoping that Matthew had seen her and would come. From within there was a rattle of kitchen utensils, and once or twice the quick, firm step of a woman upon the flagged floor.

She knocked. There was a lull in the sounds from the kitchen, but no one came; she knocked again, more loudly; then, taken with a sudden determination and remembering that the house was her own, she went in. Sally met her in the parlour, the room she had cleaned and sweetened in long days of drudgery. Knuckles on her broad hips, she now stood challenging the inspection of the other woman. For the first time in their lives the two stood face to face and measured for the battle. Helen quickly recognized the strength of her antagonist, for Sally looked domestic, homely, cleanly, comfortable from top to toe; and her face was honest, whilst the fresh, sweet atmosphere of the room was a testimony of her worth to an ease-loving fleshly man.

Deep in her ample bosom Sally's heart was beating like a distracted thing. Twenty times

that morning she had looked at herself in the glass; now she saw the other woman—and wondered. Helen Beech had put on her armour for the battle. She was exquisitely dressed, laced, frilled, breathing out a subtle perfume. Sally felt a coarse, homespun thing beside her. In a flash of comparison she put her goodly proportions and cheeks of rustic red against the graceful outlines and ivory paleness of the other. How could any man look upon the two and hesitate over his choice! Sally came of those who bent their backs humbly to breeding and dignity. The fire went out of her bold eyes, her head drooped, her hands slipped to her sides. Helen Beech missed none of this and it encouraged her to speak.

"I am Mrs. Beech," she said. "Is my husband at home?"

The word "husband" whipped up Sally's defiance again. She raised her head. "No!" she answered.

There followed another moment of silence and scrutiny. "You are Sarah Burdock?"

"Yes."

"When will your master be home?"

Sally flushed at this ignoring of her status in the eyes of Matthew. "My man," she said emphati-

cally, "be gone to Peterminster, and he'll be back at dark."

The thrust went home. Sally followed it up. "I reckon you've come to see me more'n you've come to see him."

"I wished to see both of you. I hope you know why, because that will spare me from paining you by saying things that might appear hard."

"Take a chair, ma'am," was Sally's answer, and forthwith she sat down herself, spreading her red, hard-worked hands in her lap

The battle was joined, and Helen Beech did not feel hopeful of victory. How could she put the case and make the appeal for the girl's sake, Matthew's sake, her own sake? "Perhaps you did not know that Mr. Beech had a wife living," she said.

"Nobody knowed for certain," answered Sally, "but all the valley knowed he had one once, and had heard the story of how she'd run away from 'un."

"I am come back." The finality in the tone Sally ignored.

"That's so," she said. "But you can't throw away a thing for rubbish and then come and claim it again when somebody have found it and patched

it and made it fit for wear. That's what I've done with Matthew Beech."

"But you did not know——"

"Do you know when I let 'un have me for good and all?" interrupted Sally.

"No."

"Then I'll tell 'ee." Sally leaned forward. "It was the night he saw your face in the wood and again at the window. *And I knew then that you had come back. He didn't!*"

"You knew?"

"I felt it in the very bones of me! For wiks I had been here workin', tryin' the man who wanted me, and makin' up my mind. It's settled. We talked it over this morning and settled it again. I'm stickin' to 'un, and he sticks to me. I've reckoned things up; you left 'un long enough for him to be free if he'd minded to go to law. I'm more his wife than you be, now. I can understand 'un, do for 'un, care for 'un, and get to the heart of 'un. You let us alone. Things be done, and I won't have 'em undone. He's havin' all I can give 'un; I'll have all I can get. I want 'un. You don't. Let us alone!" Sally's voice vibrated with the intensity of her emotion and she paused for breath and to recover calmness.

She got up. "I'm glad you called me no hard

names," she said quietly, "and I thank 'ee for that. Good marnen'!"

Helen Beech held out a protesting hand. "No, no!" she cried, "let me reason with you!"

"Reasonin' is done!" Sally turned to go.

"Not yet; you must think of the consequences to yourself." The younger woman smiled.

"I know 'em."

"The dishonour and disgrace?"

Sally's eyes flashed. "You freed 'un years ago. Doan't I know the law would have said so if he'd axed it. You want 'un because I've got 'un. Leave us alone, I tell 'ee! I can make Matthew happy; you can't. He wants me; he's my man. I've paid the price for 'un, and I'll have 'un. Go away!" Sally swung a powerful, dramatic arm towards the door.

Helen Beech rose up. "I must see my husband. He will ruin himself and you."

"Meanin' we'll lose the farm?"

"You can't stay here."

"We doan't want to. Do 'ee know why I've sent 'un to Peterminster?" Sally's eyes had a gleam of triumph in them. "I've sent 'un to look for another place. Nothin' of yours will I have. I've got pride. I'll make my own home with my own hands. Look at 'em! Work's their friend!"

The roughened hands, womanly and shapely in spite of years of labour in the fields, were thrust out with a gesture that had a fine dignity in it. "They've kept me; they'll kip me again; and look 'ee, my man have kissed 'em!"

Sally had spoken the last and effective words. The other turned abruptly, walked quickly through the door and away across the field, never once looking back. Sally watched her disappear, then collapsed into a chair. She felt she had won her man, and a great desire for him surged up within her. She wanted to feel his arms about her just at that moment. "I shall grow to love 'un," she murmured, and felt half afraid.

Matthew spent the afternoon in Peterminster and did his utmost to appear busy. Except for a pint of dinner ale he avoided the taverns, and quite early in the evening he commenced the long climb towards the Beacon and home. Reaching the top of the ridge, with Sheepdene lying before him rosy in the sunset valley, he turned aside a little to go into Swainswick for a few minutes' gossip; he had avoided the village in the morning.

When he turned into the main street he heard unmistakable sounds of revelry from the "Yew Tree." The jovial noises heartened him and a sudden craving for company awoke within him.

It would not be dark for an hour, so he could snatch a bit of life and still keep his promise to Sally. He put his horse to the trot.

Entering the inn he nearly fell over a dancing gipsy in the passage. It was the young man who had ridden with old Barrow in the morning, and Beech was struck with his likeness to Jasper, of whom he was a comic opera edition. He was, in fact, Jasper's cousin Peter, and the heir to the chieftainship which the Master of Sheepdene had forsworn. The farmer had no desire for gipsy company, but Peter knew him and hailed him gleefully. "Welcome, old pal!" he shouted. "You are just in time to be crowned king of the company. Never mind what happened years ago. Let us bury our noses and all unkindness in a pot of ale." He took the farmer's arm and commenced to drag him to join the revellers. Beech shook him off. Peter grabbed again, protesting his friendship. "Pal of Jasper's, pal o' mine!" he cried. "I'm not going to sell you a horse in the dark. Listen!" He jingled the money in his pocket. "Come and toss off a love to the Gorgio lasses; there's the peach of all maidens to bring you the beer."

Beech gripped the gipsy by the shoulder. "Look here my man, I want nothing of you or your tribe,

and I don't want to make trouble in the house of a friend. Get to your amusement. I am going in here." He threw Peter aside and entered the parlour. Adam Stone sat there, and the two men nodded to each other. Beech pulled the bellrope.

"Driven you from your usual corner," he remarked to Adam, and jerked his thumb in the direction of the kitchen.

"Ay."

"What are they doing here?"

"Staying."

"Lodging?"

"Lodging. The dark gentleman at Sheepdene doan't seem to want his own colour about 'un."

"Other visitors," snapped Beech, and then wished he hadn't spoken.

"Ay," rumbled Adam viciously. "I've heard ther's a strange beauty in the house; and he've another down to Miss Trotter's."

"And still another here," said Beech, and he rivetted his gaze on the stonemason's face.

"Damn him!" snarled Adam; "he's making trouble."

"For himself," was the rejoinder.

Watkin came in, and Matthew ordered ale for himself and the stonemason; it occurred to him that they had a grievance in common. He

sprawled in a chair, drumming his fingers on the wooden arms. The ale was brought.

"To you!" said Beech, lifting the two-handled cup and draining half its contents.

"To you, farmer!" replied Adam, sipping his ale and putting the cup down. Sitting alone in the room the minds of both men reached out and touched. Each waited for the other to speak. Beech began. "We were talking about Mr. Barrow of Sheepdene."

"Friend of your'n?" queried Adam.

"I took an interest in him—for reasons."

"H'm!" The stonemason cogitated.

Beech tried again. "According to all accounts you didn't exactly fall in love with him at first sight."

Adam's reply to this was puzzling and shook the last rays of complacency from his companion.

"Who is the woman at Sheepdene?"

"Why do you want to know?"

Adam faced the other across the table. "To keep the news to myself," he answered.

"She's my wife!"

"I thought so," said the stonemason, and took another sip of ale.

Beech felt that his own honour and worth were being challenged. "She is nothing to him," he

exclaimed in a heat; "she has been coming in secret for years."

"Ther' was a woman in the house then."

"And now."

"Jane Gosling. What be you a-goin' to do about it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I fought 'un for less than that; ay, and tried to kill 'un!"

Beech shot sharply forward and leaned over the table, his eyes searching Adam's heavy features. "Good God!" he ejaculated softly.

"I put 'un in bed for a spell, and he put I out o' Swainswick for a month. The job bain't finished."

"Sophie?"

"Sophie!"

"He's sweet on Miss Carden."

"One woman won't satisfy his gipsy cravings. I'm watching."

Laughter rang out from the kitchen again, and Sophie's ripple was mingled with it. Adam turned his head and listened. "Ther's another black-faced thief to be watched now. And look 'ee, farmer, what I've told you I'm telling nobody else."

"We're sharing secrets, my good fellow."

"Did you notice that one of 'em here is the very spit of him at Sheepdene?"

"Yes; he's dam'd handsome, too."

"Ay, in a flash way," assented Adam.

"You are watching him in particular?"

"Yes; he'll try his tricks with Sophie, and he's enough like t'other as bewitched her to put her off her guard. Let him put the soil of his vagabond lips on her sweet cleanness and I'll do for 'un as sure as ther's a God in Heaven!" Adam's fist came down on the table with a bang that filled the room. Beech was too gross in texture properly to understand such volcanic passion, and it alarmed him. "Go easy!" he said; then added, "I shouldn't sit about here so much."

"I'm here till closing time as long as they be here; mayhap I shall be about outside afterwards. I'll see her light go out each night."

Beech finished his ale thoughtfully. "I'm sorry you're so hard hit, Adam."

"Man, I love her, love her! Do 'ee know what that means? I love every turn of her dainty body, every light in her soft eyes, every word that falls from her lips. And I worship the white soul of her. It's goin' back to God without a stain upon it even if I have to send it afore its time and go to hell myself!"

Matthew Beech stood up. He felt curiously little. Adam gave the conversation another of

his quick puzzling turns. "How be Sally Burdock?" he asked.

"Very well."

"Be you stickin' to her?"

"Yes."

"You took her from her proper man and I ought to hate 'ee for it. I doan't."

"No," said Beech.

"But she'll need to watch."

"Why?"—there was a note of alarm in the question.

"Dick Burridge is drinkin' heavily; he's in the kitchen now, but we ha'n't heard his voice."

"The fellow is a poor tool!"

"Maybe, but he covets Sally more and more. She's showin' mettle, and he knows what he's lost. She's puttin' on fine feathers; he hates her for it. Watch 'un!"

"I will."

"He won't touch you."

Beech laughed. "I'll be going before it is dark." He shook hands. "Be careful, Adam, and keep a watch on yourself. Trust Sophie, she's a good girl!"

"The best! Good evenin' to 'ee farmer."

Matthew Beech rode off deep in thought.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LETTER

FOILED in her attempt to influence the woman, Helen Beech prepared to make her appeal to the man. She shut herself in her room and rigorously analysed her feelings. Had she any real desire for him, or was she acting as Sally roundly stated from motives of jealousy? She had refused him, left him, and long years had intervened. He had changed for the worst, and she did not shut her eyes to this. She persuaded herself that jealousy of Sally's position was among the minor promptings that had brought her to Sheepdene. She owed far more to what she considered her husband's honour, and infinitely more to a desire for purity in the house and home that were, after all, her own. She had broken away from conjugal relation, but the bond had never been severed. Year after year she had come to haunt for a few furtive hours the scene of her brief and unhappy wedded life. Often she had been tempted to

go back to her husband. Had her child lived the temptation would have been irresistible. If Matthew knew that through her fatherhood had been his, would he—could he—submit to be bound by a sordid infatuation? He had coarsened and degenerated. Why? Was not she the cause? She was older, cooler, and a lonely life that was no real life had schooled her to forbearance and forgiveness. Was there so much for her to forgive? She had married of her own free choice, and now confessed that she had inflicted greater wrongs than those she had suffered. Late in the afternoon she sat down and wrote to Matthew. The letter was frank and honest, but, until she told the story of the child he had never seen, there was no breath of affection in it; then her heart warmed a little towards the man who had given her the babe, whose fingers had touched hers with so brief and light a caress. She forgave, asked for pardon for herself, and offered to return to him at once. Sally was not mentioned.

When Matthew came slowly up the hill in the gathering night, Sol was waiting for him with the letter. "For you, farmer. 'Tis from the missus, and I'll call round to 'ee in the marnen' for an answer. She'd like 'ee to sleep on it and say neither 'Yes' nor 'No' in a hurry."

Beech took the little packet and stared at his name in the neat, clerkly hand, once so familiar, but now like a writing from the dead. His first impulse was to return it unopened; on second thoughts he put it into his pocket, wished Solomon "good-evening," and rode on, his fingers straying round and round the edges of the envelope. Was this another kink in the tangle of his association with Sally?

He reached the farm, took his horse round to the stable and handed it to the waiting boy. Going into the harness room with his saddle he took down a lantern with the intention of lighting it and reading the letter straight away. He hesitated over striking the match, put the lantern up again, and went into the house with the envelope still unopened in his pocket.

Sally was waiting, every womanly instinct in her aroused and alert. A quick glance at Matthew's face told her that something had happened, and her breath came quickly. The fight was not over; well, she was ready for further battle; the flesh-pots of the farm were better than the crumbs of Dick Burridge's cottage; besides, she had paid the full price, and a deep yearning to hold for its own sake what she had bought was stirring within her. She asked no questions, made no comments,

but, after the first sharp spasm of fear, came forward cheerfully and affectionately and kissed Matthew. "You do look tired, my dear," she said softly.

"I be," answered Matthew. He looked round the room. It was spotless in the lamplight, the table was beautifully spread and there was a bowl of flowers in the centre. This last was a new departure, but Sally's senses had been quickened by the fragrance that had breathed into the room from the rich clothing of her antagonist; the subtle essence had stirred her and she feared that some power lay behind it; she had put a late rose into her own bodice only to take it out again.

She put him gently into his seat, stood for a moment with her arm upon his shoulder, then exclaimed with a laugh, "Here be I, aching to cuddle 'ee, and you fair clammed for supper!" She stooped, gave him a swift kiss and went to her own chair. She piled his plate, chatting about folk he might have met in Peterminster, maintaining a cheerful tone although she got the shortest of replies. The letter was burning in the man's pocket. Eating, presently, gave him an excuse for absolute silence.

Supper over he suddenly looked across at Sally, who was ready with an instant smile. "Have you seen Burridge hanging about here?" he asked.

"No," she replied, fearful lest he should suspect her of any coquetting with the old flame; then she added, "Why do 'ee ask?"

"If you see him, let me know at once."

"But why, Matthew? I've done wi' he."

"I know; but he hasn't done with you."

Sally came across; she was trembling a little. "What do 'ee mean?"

"I called in Swainswick. Burridge is getting drunk at the 'Yew Tree.' In his cups he threatens mischief."

Sally laughed and drew herself up, feeling her strength. "Bain't afraid of he, my dear."

"A man with drink and a grievance inside of him can be dangerous."

"Pooh!" cried she; "and so, my dear, you be worritin' about I; thought 'twas summat else."

"What else?"

"She've been here."

Beech turned from the table. "Yes," he said, with a quick intake of breath, and his hand went to his pocket.

"We had a talk. I told her that we were joined in all except law and had took oath to keep it up. I said you had gone to Peterminster to look for another farm and that we wanted nothing of hers."

"There was no quarrel?"

"Never a real cross word."

Beech took the letter from his pocket. "Sol gave me this as I came along; it is from her."

Sally saw the seal was unbroken. "Why doan't 'ee read it?" She took a knife, opened the envelope and handed it to him. "I'll go into the kitchen."

He put out a hand and detained her. "No!" She stayed, putting her hand lightly upon his shoulder. She feared the letter as though it were a part of the woman, so she maintained her physical contact with the man. Beech read. The letter was long, and the first portion, stirring up old feuds, irritated him. Suddenly a new something came between the lines, as it were, putting a vice-grip upon his attention. He read of the child, the son of his that had breathed, smiled upon its mother, printed a beloved image upon her heart—and then returned whence it came. "My God! My God!" he groaned, and the letter fluttered to the table, swayed on its edge for a moment, and then went rustling to the floor. Sally, her knees rocking with apprehension, stooped giddily and picked it up. She steeled herself to put it into his hands without a glance at a word. Reading with her was a slow and laborious process, but there was one simple word that, had she

seen it, would have hurt like a knife-thrust in her bosom. She waited.

Beech's eyes stared into vacancy trying to picture his child. The man was gross, almost apoplectic, and his breath came labouredly. Sally's arm came closer about him, but so gently that he did not perceive that the touch was becoming a clasp. His fingers closed again upon the letter, the stare went out of his eyes, his mind came back to the details of things about him, to Sally's soothing touch upon his greying and thinning hair. But he did not read. The big clock ticked slowly on as laboriously as the man's breath. The lamp sputtered. A moth beat its wings against the hot chimney and fell scorched upon the cloth. The pitiful lowing of a cow whose calf had been taken from it came echoing in from the hill. The man heard, understood, and shivered. The shudder was dimly telepathic to the woman. Vaguely she began to understand something. A desire to rush into the open air came upon her. She stooped and whispered hoarsely, "I'll leave 'ee for a while, Matthew. You want *her* for a bit, doan't 'ee? And I'll trust 'ee, my dear, for now I know I do love 'ee." She lifted his hand and kissed it. It was a little sign of submission she had never given him before, and she remembered

what she had said to his wife that morning. He gripped her fingers. "You must read first," he said, and the voice was harsh and rasping.

Sally looked at the open page. She read; read again. Her knees refused to support her, and she sank to the floor, uttering no cry, no sound. To her the call of her womanhood had been a danger for many years, and now the craving for motherhood awoke clamant and fierce. It brought her to her feet again, her arms about the man. "I understand 'ee, my dear, I understand 'ee," she wailed, "and my heart just about aches for 'ee. But what of me! Can't I give 'ee sons? I can give 'ee a houseful. Do 'ee hear, my dear? A houseful, all bonny and strong. And I do love 'ee; you've made me love 'ee. She doan't love 'ee, my dear. Doan't 'ee know that? And you do love I; you have sworn it. Doan't 'ee leave me! doan't 'ee leave me!" She clung desperately for a minute, then released him, ran from the room, the house, into the night wind and the cold light of the stars.

Matthew Beech bowed his head upon the table. He had to make up his mind; and Solomon was coming for an answer in the morning. But the night still remained for Sally Burdock.

CHAPTER XXVII

BEHIND THE HEDGE, AND BEYOND

In spite of the visit of his father—quite a welcomed episode—Jasper Barrow had spent an uncomfortable and somewhat depressing day. His mind was rankling with a sense of injustice, and of the fatuity of human affairs. The dwellers in houses were a many-headed people, living a multiplex life that he did not properly understand. The simple loves and hates, and primitive passions and emotions of his gipsy folk were elementary things that needed no explanation, but the tortuous twistings and manifold ravellings of thought and action that now surrounded him were a puzzle. A definite and like action from a hundred different people would have been viewed by him from one fixed standpoint and condemned or approved accordingly. He found that even old Jane moved her view-point with each separate person involved, meting out one judgment to one and another judgment to another.

The behaviour of Julia Carden mortified him exceedingly, and the advent of his father with the bride horse and outspoken views upon marriage turned his attention sharply to everything that had happened between them. The words she had flung at him on the night of the supper stung him especially when he recalled them; they were so bitterly ungenerous and unfair. He asked himself a hundred times, "What have I done?" And he winced when he thought that, maybe, colour and class prejudice was at the bottom of it all. Was he just "gipsy" to the proud beauty? Yet the aunt welcomed him gladly.

As Julia had said, he knew exactly what he had done when he saved her from deadly danger in Pottersham lane. She owed him a life. Why, then, should she taunt him and flout him? The injustice was colossal.

Was it war between them? Already he and Adam had drawn blood and there were mutterings of another battle. Now Matthew Beech threatened. He cared less than a snap of the finger for the farmer and his threats, but he recoiled from quarrels with his neighbours. Beech, for a sentimental reason, had offered friendship. Jasper knew that abysmal differences in taste, temperament, and habit made this impossible. Still, a

neighbour was a neighbour. So also, he told himself, a woman in trouble was doubly a woman in a man's eyes, and he had gipsy ideals of blood claims and tribal hospitality. Matthew Beech might rage and tear; it would be all in vain.

Jasper supped with his father and his guest, and the meal over he left them to talk with Jane Gosling of old times that were only a fable to him. Lighting a pipe he went into the porch and looked down upon the "house with the dormers." The night was faintly starlit, with a fresh breeze rustling through the valley from the south-west, and promising rain within the next twelve hours. Unrest and change were in the air, and it suited his mood. His thoughts travelled down the hill, and they called upon him to follow and probe the mystery that was baffling them. Beauty was down there in the stable. Did he know that a maid was patting the arching and sheeny neck? Why was the horse retained and the pledge that it symbolized rejected? Old Barrow, with true gipsy reticence, had said nothing to his son of the maid's refusal of the gift. He had taken it down; it remained there; therefore she had accepted it. Why? There could be no reason except that the mystic Midsummer compact remained unbroken in reality. Then there was the bond of the night

when she had been the ministering and tender friend; that had bound him to her. Then a whirl of dust and scattering stones had ringed them in; that, surely, should bind her to him. He would go to her and ask for an explanation; if she refused the request he would demand it as a right.

Jasper stepped across the lawn, through the gardens and into the meadow, following the path to the road. Presently footfalls in the lane arrested his attention. He listened; they were too light for a man and too heavy for the maid he sought. He walked on. The footsteps were those of Sally Burdock. She had wandered for some time in the fields around the house, then a desire, or rather a hope, of meeting Matthew's wife led her towards Sheepdene, for she knew that the lady took walks after dark. She hung about near the house for some time, then walked down the hill; the woman might have gone off in the direction of Swainswick. Sally wanted time for herself, time for Matthew, and she did not wish to face him again until the first shock of his wife's letter had passed. She could not appeal to a man who was only half listening.

As Jasper neared the border of the field the woman in the lane passed a low part of the hedge; he noticed that she was bonnetless, but did not

recognize his former field servant. Withdrawing his gaze he was startled to see the figure of a man against the hedge, in the field itself, stealthily following the woman. The fellow was in the half-crouching attitude that screened him from observation and gave him the surer sight of his own path. To see him was to suspect him of evil intentions. Jasper moved more quickly, running lightly on his toes, the man too intent upon his own purpose to see or hear anything behind him. A couple of tall elms intervened, and the tracker straightened himself. He stumbled and threw out his arms to keep his balance. A pale flash that could be only the glint of steel moved in a short curve at the end of his arm. Jasper realized with horror that the man was out for the worst of all the deeds of darkness. Who was he? And who was the woman walking unsuspecting and defenceless beyond the hedge? He remembered that fifty yards or so below there was a gateway, the gate off its hinges to facilitate the carting of the harvest. That was the point where the attack would be made. A quick stab, a dash for the fields again, and a dodging from copse to hedge and hedge to copse in any direction. Chance was rendering murder diabolically easy.

Jasper was running in pace with his hurrying

thoughts, fiercely hoping that the fellow would not hear him and make a murderous dash for the gateway whilst he was yet too far away to deal with him. The gap came into view; the man stopped; the woman had stopped also; Jasper doubled down like a dog and ran on. The woman moved; the watcher took a few quick strides to the gateway and crouched for the final movement. Jasper realized that only seconds separated him from a moment of murder. He bounded down, and the would-be assassin heard him. The fellow sprang, stood irresolute for an instant of time, just long enough to give one glance at the gateway and another at the rushing hands outstretched to capture him. He was too late to dash out for the woman, so took a frenzied decision to turn his knife against the man who had discovered and thwarted him. He backed to the hedge, sending a shiver of sound along the bushes that brought Sally to a frightened halt. The next moment Jasper's hands were upon him, but they secured no grip, for the knife gleamed wickedly in the starshine and plunged downwards into Jasper's breast just below the shoulder. It was out and in again with a second thrust, accompanied by a squealing cry of rage and a sharp "Ah!" of pain from the stricken man. Jasper tottered from

the shock and threw up his arms for protection, the point of the knife ripping along his right hand. The fellow hurled him out of the way, sprang for the gateway and went off in a wild swaying run down the lane. Sally, recognizing Burridge's voice and suddenly remembering Matthew's warning, turned and fled uphill for her life. Her nerves had been tried too sorely during the day to permit her to take thought for anything but her own safety. Jasper was left badly bleeding, faintness rapidly coming over him, striving to regain his feet and totter to the road.

A minute of frantic running brought Burridge to the bottom of the valley and the stream. To his left, abutting on the lane was Miss Trotter's, and as he thudded over the bridge a flash of light in his eyes pulled him up. Already he had cast his knife from him, so he lurched towards the farther parapet blinking stupidly at a lantern in Julia's hands. She was coming from the stables after saying "good-night" to Beauty. It was easy to recognize her with the light of the lantern shining upon her face. Burridge's halt of terror lasted barely half-a-dozen pulses of his heart, then he ran again, head down and hand before his face. But the girl had taken alarm also. "Who are you?" she called out.

"Man hurted!" yelled Burridge, and disappeared into the darkness. A crash through the hedge told that he had taken to the fields and was running north towards Pottersham. The only available doctor lived in the opposite direction, in Swainswick. The behaviour of the fleeing man sent a throb of fear through Julia's heart that held her motionless. Then her nerve reasserted itself. There was not a sound along the valley, and somewhere a man lay incapable of movement. With the lantern still in her hand she ran sharply up the lane in the direction from which the other had come. The speed of his flight told her that she would have some little way to go.

She neared the gateway, the lifted lantern lighting the dark road that rose before her. Not many yards beyond was the spot where she had met Jasper one fateful night. Her thoughts had been full of him for hours, and the memory of the meeting darted across her brain. Oh! to meet him now when the fear of a deed of wickedness was upon her, and she all alone! Something lay half-way through the gap where the gate had been; something that moaned and strove to rise from hands and knees. A faint scream came from her, and the lantern dropped. There was a gasp rather than a call for help; but faint and blurred

as the intonation was she knew it. "God! Oh God!" she wailed, snatched up the lantern, and in an instant was kneeling by his side. "Mr. Barrow! Jasper! Jasper! What is the matter?" she cried. But Jasper heard nothing, dimly aware that help had come at last he rolled over unconscious. Putting her hands to him she drew them back with a scream. Blood again! Almost she fainted beside him at the touch of the awful dabble of his clothing. The lantern rays showed her a possibly dying man. And she loved him so much that life without him would be savourless. In that moment truth was naked to her. She must save him. She stood up and called aloud for help, but quickly realized that none could hear her except her aunt and the old groom-gardener in the cottage. She could save time, perhaps life, by running down to them; there was not a second to be lost. Leaving the lantern she fled down to the house.

Sally Burdock ran until she came within the shelter of the lights of Sheepdene House, then, knowing that a refuge was close at hand, she stopped to regain breath and listen for sounds of pursuit; there were none. Her wits had been scattered by the suddenness of her fright, but the absence of immediate danger enabled her to re-

cover them quickly enough. She had no doubt that the cry of rage came from the throat of her discarded lover, and she felt equally sure that his purpose had been to waylay her. But there was another man, a struggle, and surely an accent of triumph, of satisfied hate in Burridge's shout! And the other man—he who had tracked the half-tipsy Burridge? A pain at her heart almost stopped its beating as her brain answered, "Matthew!" Her long absence from the house had alarmed him and he had come out to look for her. Burridge was prowling about and Matthew had caught sight of him, followed him, and—! She realized the terrible possibility, turned, and ran down the hill again.

The glow of the lantern caught her eyes. Already someone was with him. Her man had fought for her, and she was not the first to be at his side! The thought was intolerable; she raced the remaining distance. In the poorly illumined mirk of the night the prone body loomed big. It was Matthew! Tears rushed to her eyes. She threw herself beside him, half-blinded with grief and horror. Quickly she upturned the face. A throb of relief was followed by another of pity and intense sorrow; the strange grace of the Master of Sheepdene had awakened a humble devo-

tion in her simple heart before Matthew had spoken. Sally pillowed the head upon her knees; she knew by the lantern that someone was gone for help, and she did what Julia had not done; she stooped her trembling lips to his forehead and kissed it.

There was a patter of feet in the lane, an upward rushing of vague forms between the tall, black hedgerows. Julia, younger than the others and her feet winged by love, was first. She found Sally Burdock white-faced and weeping, her misbegotten finery soiled by grim streaks. A passion of jealousy that such a woman should touch him sprang up even in the midst of her love and grief, so big and so many chambered is the heart of a woman; but Sally soothed it. She changed to a kneeling position, holding Jasper in her arms. "Take 'un, miss; he be yours!" she said softly. And Julia took him. Only Sally was near enough to see her. She bent a proud head and kissed the unconscious man on the closed eyes and the set lips. "That's right," whispered Sally; "'Twill ease 'ee a lot."

Miss Trotter's man and his wife came up, panting and scared, and practically helpless. "We must carry 'un home," said Sally.

"No, no; it is too far. I must have him; I *will* have him!" sobbed Julia.

"Quite right, too; and 'twill be nearer to the doctor," was the quiet answer. Sally turned to the man. "Get you a-horseback, gardener, and gallop for your life and his'n. We'll see to 'un now. If need be I can carry 'un myself."

"Ther's the gate off his hinges."

"So 'tis; now you go."

"Take Beauty; never mind a saddle; she will fly along the hills. Let the doctor ride her back. Go! go!" commanded Julia. The man turned and ran.

Sally spoke to his wife. "Come you here, missus, and help I wi' the gate." They brought it from the field. "'Tis a hard bed," said Sally, and forthwith ripped her dress from her back and spread it along the bars; the woman put her shawl for a pillow. Sally stooped and took Jasper round the hips, sending the woman to his feet. "Get up gently, miss," she said to Julia. They placed him on the gate, and he roused a little and moaned. The sound of life and feeling heartened them, and they went as quickly as possible down the lane, Sally taking one end of the improvised stretcher and Julia and the gardener's wife the other. The lantern was between Jasper's feet. The sounds of Beauty's hoofs were already ringing out from the opposite hill as she raced to Swainswick.

Miss Trotter had the house lighted from top to bottom and a bed of soft cushions ready. Julia had said nothing about bringing Jasper there, but the old lady had read the heart of her niece and knew exactly what she would do.

Once more Jasper was in the familiar room, but unconscious of his surroundings this time. The women wasted no moment. Julia had regained control of her emotions and exhibited a coolness and firmness that astonished Sally. The aid of the latter was invaluable; indeed, her strength was almost indispensable, and Julia found her aversion to her presence gradually softening. Between them they cut away the upper garments, partially staunched the bleeding, and bandaged the wounds before the doctor arrived. When he came Sally betook herself to the kitchen to put on her dress, sponge out the worst of the stains, and pin together the rents she had made. Her anxiety to get back to Matthew and relieve any fears of his was keen to the verge of pain. But for the while another man had prior claim to her presence, for he had risked a life and was in agony and danger for her.

Time and loneliness were hers for a few minutes, and she tried to think, but thought stunned her. The tragedies of the valley were settling down—

a monstrous and many-limbed thing—upon her shoulders, and the burden was more than she could bear. In her rustic ignorance and peasant humility she had judged herself as a thing whose importance was a trifle above that of a decently-bred beast in a farmer's fields. She had gone to Matthew Beech seeing little harm in her lapse from orthodox "virtue"; the conditions of his life and the bond that now existed between them had obliterated the smear which Sally had at the first acknowledged. She meant to be honest with her man, rigidly true to him, and a loyal slave to his interests and personal happiness. If one had asked her an hour before if she considered herself a "good woman" she would have answered "Yes," and believed it. But now she was frightened, superstitiously terrorized by a dread of punishment; her hand had been thrust as a destroyer into the destinies of three men, and there was blood upon it. The wages of her "sin" were being paid to others beside herself. She longed for her man, and wondered affrightedly whether he could find words to soothe her, forgive her. Forgive her for what? She had only done what he had begged her to do! And now she loved him; the fact of their union had already brought into being the simple primitive love of which alone she was

capable. During that half-hour in Miss Trotter's kitchen the world was a wilderness of darkness, threatening shapes, pitfalls, and entangling briers to the scared eyes and stumbling feet of Sally Burdock.

The doctor had examined his patient, restored him to consciousness, and given his verdict; this last was hopeful, and Julia, mindful of the woman who had done so much and was waiting for a cheering word, came into the kitchen to tell her.

"Thank God! thank God!" cried Sally, and tears of relief began to stream down the big red cheeks. Julia soothed her. "It was a mercy you found him, too," she said, "and I shall never know how to thank you. How came you to find him?"

Sally nearly choked over her answer. "I was ther', miss; the knife was meant for me. He saved me!"

Julia shrank back as though the other had struck her. "You! you!" she gasped.

Sally saw the look in the other's eyes, and it burnt her. "You do wish I were dead!" she moaned; "so do I. God A'mighty forgive me!" She snatched up the latch of the door and disappeared into the darkness.

Julia sank to her knees beside a chair, covered her eyes, and broke into fierce sobbing. "Another woman again! His blood on my hands a second time; and always another woman!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

NIGHT IN MANY PLACES

MEANWHILE Burridge was away through Pottersham and speeding along the empty wolds, ever going northwards, the wind that followed mocking him with sounds of justice dogging his heels. Sally had made no mention of his name, and she, alone, knew who Jasper's assailant was. Barrow himself had no knowledge of the man and remembered nothing but a dim clod-hopping figure against the background of a night-shrouded hedge; and Julia's vision of a man bent and fleeing was too vague for identification. She did not see the doctor after Sally's startling avowal, and what was said so lacerated her heart that she kept it for a while to herself.

The doctor went back to Swainswick and reported the matter. Rumours of mischief were already afloat, scattered through the village by the flying hoofs of Beauty.

The constable in his wisdom suspected the two gipsies and hastened to the "Yew Tree," to find

Peter hilarious with ale. There was a chorus of smoke-enveloped witnesses to prove that he had not left the kitchen all the evening. Peter, sobered by the news, cudgelled his brain in a search for possible enemies, but found none. His gentleman-cousin was not well known amongst the nomad peoples, and he could offer no solution of the mystery.

Watkin's thoughts flew to Adam Stone, and he slipped away to the parlour, fearful lest the stone-mason should be missing. But Adam still sat where Beech had left him. He looked him critically up and down. "Been out?" he asked.

"No."

"Then you ha'n't heard the news?"

"What news?"

"Mr. Barrow have been set on in his own fields and next door to murdered!"

Adam went ashen-grey. Watkin watched him. "That's why you asked me if I'd been out?"

"It was, Adam."

"You suspected me?"

"You've done a lot of talking, and 'twas spiteful hands that used the knife. Had the blade been bigger the doctor says that a few minutes would have ended 'un. As 'tis he'd have bled to death pretty quick."

"Who—who found 'un?"

"Miss Carden; he's at her house. 'Tis a toss-up with 'un even now."

"Ah!"

"There's a hunt out after the murderer, and you must join."

Adam made no move. "D'ye hear?" cried Watkin.

"I heard 'ee."

"Then for God's sake move and not sit there like a stone image. What be 'ee broodin' about now? Doan't I tell 'ee that Miss Carden have took 'un to nurse 'un! Do 'ee think he will leave her hands with a thought in his head for another maid?"

"I was thinking whether it might be Farmer Beech."

"As killed 'un?" exclaimed Watkin in horror.

"No, as was killed," muttered Adam, rising to his feet at last. He passed into the ale kitchen, the landlord following and wondering whether the stonemason's brain was softening. Suddenly Adam took him by the sleeve and whispered, "Wher's Sophie?"

"Upstairs, cryin' her heart out; wher' dost think she is?" snapped the father.

Adam kept his thoughts to himself. And he

went home. Presently Swainswick emptied itself of able manhood, all gone to the red spot in Sheepdene Lane, from thence to scatter in a grim game of "hare and hounds" through the gloom of the autumn night. When the streets were empty Adam went down to the cottage where Dick Burridge had lodged. A light still burned and he knocked cautiously at the door. A middle-aged woman, yawning and sleepy, answered the knocking. "Is Dick in?" he asked.

"No, a' bain't," answered the woman crossly. "I ha'n't seed 'un since tea time, and be gettin' tired of waitin'. What's happened to set so many heels clackin' on the roadway?"

"Bit of a man hunt," answered Adam.

"And Dick's gone?"

"He's in it sure enough! And I shouldn't wait up. He won't be home tonight." The stonemason turned abruptly away and climbed to the main street again. He reached the churchyard wall and leaned over, staring at the lines of the graves and the avenues of green-black yews. "Must ha' mistook his man," he muttered. Then, after a pause, he added: "Bain't so dark, neither. If he were so drunk as that he ought to have been too drunk to strike such sure blows. Wonder if the gipsy man have been meddlin' wi'

Sally!" Adam was so besotted with jealousy and suspicion of the dark bogey of Sheepdene House that he would have believed Jasper capable of any infamy where a woman was concerned. Slowly but surely, unless rudely checked, the man would travel the haunted road to madness.

. . . . . .

The drama of the night moved back to "the house with the dormers," where lives were being stirred to deeps unplumbed before. Julia Carden, riven by the tragedy of what she had found by the gateway, shocked by Sally's disclosure, stained by the red tide that had ebbed with the life she loved, sat huddled upon the floor helpless and hopeless. Sally, with a few words, had broken the proud, passionate spirit. For years it had been a spirit all alone in that which most mattered; dreams had fed it; cold facts of life in the peaceful valley had starved it, for there was no peace in monotony for so ardent a soul. Hope at last had brought the gift of gifts, standing a little way off for her to come and take it. And she had put her hands behind her and stood still, pride mortifying the spirit that longed so ardently. Now hope was not hope but an illusion, and the proffered gift a shameful substitution for the reality.

She heard the door close behind the doctor to

re-open immediately. Jasper's father hurried in and upstairs where his son was lying. Jane Gosling sobbed and lamented in the hall, and the stranger woman's voice, soft-toned, with its low, musical pitch, tried to soothe her. Julia knew it must be the secret guest at the house and wondered dully if she were as beautiful as her voice. Presently the women were called upstairs, and she got wearily upon her feet again. The events of the past few days, coupled with the war in her heart, had tested her severely; the last hours had tightened the strain to breaking point. And the fight within herself was not finished. Two fiercely opposed desires swayed her; if she followed the one she would thrust everybody from Jasper's room, claim him absolutely for herself, defy fatigue and physical limitations, and nurse him unaided; the other desire was to leave him entirely to others and teach her heart that she did not care. She took the dark, narrow stairway that led from the kitchen and went to her own room. Jasper lay just beyond the wall, and very faintly voices came to her. She took off her stained frock and lay down upon the bed. Her aunt found her there some time afterwards, shivering in mental misery. She diagnosed the condition as due to shock and natural grief, so, firmly but kindly,

ordered her into bed for rest and sleep. Uniting action with command she commenced to unfasten her niece's shoes, chatting the while.

"It is a terrible blow for you, dear, and my heart aches for you both. But we can hope for the best. Jasper is young and strong. If all ends well, it will be a very happy 'well,' as we shall have him all the while. Don't you see, child, he will now owe a life to you? And of course he *will* get well!"

Julia made no answer. Miss Trotter went on. "It will be a most beautiful story for both of you to live with; husband and wife owing their lives to one another! Doesn't the thought thrill you, Julia?"

The girl shuddered. Her aunt kissed her and whispered gently, "You and I will be his nurses from tomorrow. Tonight I cannot do it, and you must not. But I have found someone who will play the good angel until the morning. After that he shall be all ours—yours!"

Words and tears shattered the girl's stoniness. "Auntie, he can never be mine! You don't know, you don't know!"

"Don't know what, dear?"

"The knife was meant for Sally Burdock!"

"Sal—ly Burdock!" The aunt shrank from

the name as the niece had done from the woman.

"She told me. They were in the lane together. And how close together for the stabs to reach him instead of her!" A shiver ran through the girl again.

It was Miss Trotter's turn to sit on the bed, stupefied and dumb. Julia spoke on, feverishly, passionately. "When I found him she was not there. She had run away. The coward! But she came back when the murdering wretch had gone. I found her sitting in the gateway with his head in her lap. Must I nurse him after this? Can I forget that other night? Is he to shed blood for other women and come to me to staunch it? Don't you see that I would rather die than go to his bedside?"

"There is some mistake, dear; some terrible mistake," pleaded Miss Trotter, misbelieving her own words.

"She told me, auntie; and shameless as her lips are I saw she spoke the truth."

"It—it can't be so!"

"It is. And oh! auntie, I love him. Why did I meddle with that wicked magic! It has held me ever since like a spell. My heart throbbed for him even before I saw his face. I tried to laugh it off.

I couldn't. The night when he fought Adam Stone and I went to him I knew I loved him. That morning at Pottersham I could have knelt to him, and he said nothing he would not have said to a stranger. Tonight I kissed him. My lips burn! They will burn for ever, burn with shame!"

Miss Trotter had no answer. With shaking hands she went on undressing the girl as though she were a little child again. "You must sleep, dear," she murmured.

"I can never sleep with him in the house," was the wild answer. "I must go away!"

"You shall go away. Try to sleep. He has a nurse for a time."

"And she?"

"Is nothing to him. I find that I know her and all her unhappy story. She has a story, dear. I will tell it to you tomorrow. The world is a sad, grey place for some of us. I am old, but I do not understand it. I thought I did. I was wrong. Try to sleep. I will come to you tonight. I will come soon."

. . . . . .

Sally Burdock went home. Matthew Beech was sitting where she had left him, and the remains of the supper upon the table seemed to her like the tasteless fragments of a funeral feast.

His pipe was cold between his lips; the letter tossed aside from the line of his vision. Beech had had his "bad hour," unconscious of the flight of time. Sally's return brought his eyes round to the big clock, standing a watchful, sleepless sentinel in the corner, as ready to register the heartbeats of their tragedy as it had marked the warm pulsings of their amorous dalliance. Matthew saw how late the hour was and turned to Sally with a question on his lips. The sight of her face brought him to his feet with an oath, and a glance at her torn dress, dusty and gruesomely stained, set his huge body rocking on its base as though for a fall.

"God above!" he cried, and stopped, the questions he would ask staring out from his eyes.

Sally's answer was to throw herself at his feet and clasp his knees, sobbing.

"Speak!" he exclaimed roughly. "What's the matter?"

"'Tis murder, Matthew!"

"Murder!"

"He meant it."

"Who meant it? Out with it, woman!" He stooped and shook her. She screamed. "Doan't 'ee! doan't 'ee!" His voice softened. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Then kiss me, Matthew," she pleaded, and

held up her face; "one kiss afore I do speak; perhaps 'twill be the last." He bent down and kissed her hair, but she threw her arms about his neck and pulled him to her, raining kisses upon him that were the hunger of love. He tried to raise her, but she would not move. "Let I kneel, my dear, let I kneel!" she panted.

He pulled up a chair and sat down, his eyes searching the rents in her dress and staring at the red blotches that were the heralds of a horror as yet unspoken. She had cried "Murder," and yet knelt before him alive. What had happened? "Speak now," he commanded.

Sally moaned out her tale. "I left' ee, dear, to think over the letter. I walked about in the meadow and then went towards Sheepdene House thinkin' I might see her. Then I walked down the hill. Dick Burridge was followin' inside the hedge and meant killin' me when I got to the open gateway. Mr. Barrow had followed 'un and jumped on 'un before he could reach me. And then—oh! God, what shall I do!—he stabbed 'un twice in the breast. I ran away when Dick called out, but I didn't know what had happened, because 'twas t'other side of the hedge. I went back again, because I thought it might be you. And there I found 'un, lying still and dead-like. Oh! Mat-

thew, 'twas terrible! And I brought it upon 'un. I've brought shame upon you. I wish I was dead!"

"Where—where's Mr. Barrow?"

"We carried 'un down to Miss Trotter's. Miss Carden must have heard, for she ran up with a lantern and found 'un first. We bandaged 'un, she and I. But 'twas horrible, the red cuts on his poor body and he lyin' senseless. They'll never forgive me; nobody will forgive me. I meant to make 'ee happy, my dear, and now I have shamed 'ee. I must go away. 'Tis cruel! cruel!" Sally choked with her sobs.

Beech waited a moment. "And Mr. Barrow?"

"The doctor have been to 'un and says ther's hope."

"What of Burridge?"

"He's gone, but they be after 'un."

Beech sat for a minute in thought; then he disengaged Sally's arms, not ungently, and stood up. "I must go down to Miss Trotter's. You go to bed," he said.

"I can't, Matthew."

"You must!" He lifted her up, and she stood facing him, her mouth quivering pitiably. "Will you come to me when you get back?"

Beech looked at the floor to avoid the pathetic

yearning in the woman's eyes. "I don't know," he answered.

She stretched out a hand timidly and touched his sleeve. "You've done wi' me?"

"I don't know. I must think." He gathered up his wife's letter and thrust it into his pocket. Sally winced. "You'll tell I in the marnen', Matthew?"

"I'll tell you in the morning."

"I shan't blame 'ee, my dear. And I'll love 'ee till—till 'tis all over!" The misery in the voice made Beech look up.

"What do you mean?" Her eyes told him almost before he asked the question.

"I mean, my dear, that I can't live without 'ee and this thing hauntin' me always. But I'll go away quietly. Ther' shan't be no more shame for folks to talk about. I'll—I'll just go quietly. Nobody shall find me. God ha'n't giv' me much; but He'll let the tide carry me out!" Sally turned and tottered to the stairs, steadying by chair and table as she passed them. Beech waited until her footsteps sounded above him. Then he blew out the lamp, put the key in his pocket, and went down to Miss Trotter's.

. . . . . .

Dick Burridge toiled on, now running, now walking, all the night. He put twenty miles of

lonely wold between himself and Sheepdene. As day dawned he dropped into a hollow where no house was in sight, worked his way cunningly into the heart of a dense coppice, and lay up after the fashion of hunted things. He slept, and the fumes of alcohol went from his brain to make room for remorse and terror.

CHAPTER XXIX

AND THE MORNING

THE south-west fulfilled its promise and the morning broke behind grey cloud and a drizzle of rain. Matthew Beech looked out from his kitchen window upon a landscape as depressing as his own thoughts. The woods were half-obscured masses of woolly green, and the opposite side of the valley a secret land hidden behind a streaming veil; so, too, behind the mask of his face were his thoughts a secret from the world. His eyes were heavy, and his face a leaden grey like that of the sky. The sleep that had come to him he had had in a chair by the side of a cold hearth.

When he left home the previous night he had gone down to Miss Trotter's, to find the place in darkness except in the room where Jasper lay. There was a light in the window of the gardener's cottage, for the man and his wife feared to go to bed, yet, with the true peasant love of the horrible,

they sat going through the story of the tragedy again and again. They welcomed the farmer as a relief to the tension of their minds, and as they knew almost as much as any one he got a connected story that filled in many details Sally had omitted.

He left them and went up the hill to Sheepdene House. Halting at the scene of the crime, and feeling that behind it there was—in a sense—the shadow of his own hand, he raked up the autumn dust and kicked soil from the bank to cover up the mute evidence of the frenzied deed.

There were lights in the big house and Gipsy Barrow and Jane Gosling were both about. They could tell him exactly what the doctor's verdict had been and the extent and nature of the wounds. So far he noted that none guessed the identity of the murderer or knew of Sally's unconscious share in what had happened. He kept his own counsel; the time for speaking would come later. There was a second purpose in his visit and presently he broached it quietly to Jane. "If my wife is not asleep and could come down, I should like a word with her."

Jane fidgetted. "To tell 'ee the truth, farmer, she bain't here at all."

"Oh!"

"Her's down to Miss Trotter's a-nursin' him."

Beech bit his lip, for the answer incensed him. "Thank you! Good-night!" he said. Jane wanted to offer some explanation, but he was gone. He hurried home, and the dawn found him brooding at his kitchen window.

The trees and the eaves dripped, dripped, dripped. Beech went into the next room, and here the stale remnants of the supper confronted him. Similar sights had greeted his eyes on a thousand mornings, but this time the thing was an offence and a portent, for such a thing had not been seen before since the advent of Sally. He wondered if she were awake, went to her bedroom door, and hearing no sounds stole down again. Had he but known it she had listened for his foot upon the stair during the livelong night, and whilst he stood without the door she prayed earnestly to the God she knew that he might enter. He did not.

The light that was suffusing the earth brought clearness to the farmer's brain. He remembered that he held keys of knowledge that by right belonged to the public. There was a hateful duty for him to perform. He watched the morning grow a little older, then saddled his horse, and rode off to the constable at Swainswick to set the chase

after a definite quarry in the person of Dick Burridge.

He went, saw the constable, and told him all he knew. Then he had Gipsy Peter awakened and held long converse with him.

He rode home again, weary in body and in heart, yet striving to strike the line of conduct he should follow in respect of Sally. He had ceased to blame her, fully recognizing that to do so was to commit the rankest injustice. She had done nothing that he had not tempted her to do. And she had been loyal and loving, more so to him than any other human creature that had come into his life. Behind her fault lay his own as a dominating factor. He owed her something more than protection; she had a right to reparation. She had knelt to him, and he was a man; so far as she was concerned he must redeem his manhood or live on in self-judged infamy. His thoughts passed on to his wife, and her letter was still in his pocket. To her also he passed the blame. Had she been loyal to him no Sally Burdock would ever have entered his life. She was nursing a man whose days were bound to earth by just one fragile thread. Well was it that she did so, for her hands, from afar, had severed all the rest. The gods were just, after all. His mind was made

up when he rode into the farmyard. That half-forgotten past must be buried. The present was of his own contriving, and he must face the future because that was the aftermath of the crop he had sown.

He entered the house. Gone were the sordid remains of the Belshazzar feast that had brought the writing on the wall. Babylon was doomed; he would escape and dwell humbly in a lesser city. The spotless cloth was laid; there was a bowl of fresh flowers jewel-spangled by the rain; the kettle was singing on the hob. Peace was his if only for an hour. He went and scrubbed himself to be meet for what was, at any rate, an outward covering of purity for his private life. Then he waited. Sally did not come. His heart and his conscience smote him for his neglect of her. Of course, she awaited his word. She had her pride; she was a woman who had given her all. He went quickly upstairs and opened the bedroom door. The room was empty. Hastening downstairs again he called to her. There was no answer, and again he went to the bedroom. Then he saw, pinned to the pillow where his own head should have rested, a sheet of notepaper covered with an ill-spelt epistle in Sally's clumsy handwriting. He read it; it was short.

MY DEAR,

"I be gone. It is best, for the folk will forget some of the shame if I bain't in their sight. I have waited all night for 'ee. You didn't come, and I bain't thinking unkind, my dear. It was to be. I won't have 'ee put to the pain of telling I to go, and it would break my heart to hear it, for oh! my dear, my dear, I do love 'ee now. If I do stay we must face the judge and it would be terrible for a proud man like you. I can spare 'ee that. There shall be no more talk of the poor girl as learned to love 'ee so well. My body will lie well hid. I have took your picter, my dear, it will help me to be brave and die willing. Bless you, my dear, bless you!

"Oh God! it is hard to go. You would have been a good man to me, wouldn't you?

"God help poor Dick and me and all of us!

"My dear! My dear!

"XXXXXXX SALLY."

Beech took the poor smeared kisses upon his lips one by one, and tears gushed from his own eyes. She was gone. Yet his breakfast was ready for him, and the bed made for him and his loneliness on the coming night. These pathetic attentions to his comfort broke him down almost as

much as the pitiful wailings that breathed out from her letter. She was gone! Hopelessly he looked round the room. There lay the stained and torn frock. He opened the wardrobe and the chest of drawers. All he had bought her was left behind and she had set out on her last journey in the rough homespun she had worn when she came to him. This hurt him, although he knew she had meant no unkindness.

He stole downstairs again. How the house seemed to echo! Was it so empty? The kettle was boiling. She could not be far away. He would bring her back. Could he stand still and let a woman sacrifice herself for him! And Sally was worth saving, worth the few years of life that yet remained to him. Hastily he crammed some food into his pocket. She would make for the tidal portion of the Severn, some way below Peterminster, striking down through Hillborough, and then south-west across the big valley. He took a stout stick, bolted all the doors, and stepped out into the rain. Through the drizzle he saw the figure of Sol Gosling shambling along towards the house. He remembered that he had to send an answer to a letter, so waited for the old man. He had no time to waste.

"Come about the letter?" he said.

"Ay, farmer, but as such mighty things have been happenin' ye might like more time to think on't. If so——"

"I've thought," exclaimed Beech. He took the letter from his pocket, tore it into tiny pieces, and thrust them into the envelope. "That's my answer," he said.

"No message o' words?" asked Sol wonderingly.

Beech hesitated. "You can tell her that I am for the woman who loves me well enough to die for me if need be. Don't forget, 'well enough to die for me.'"

"I'll remember."

"Very well, then, good-morning. Sorry I can't offer you a cup of ale. Sally's gone out and I am in a hurry. If anybody wants me I shall be back tonight."

"And Sally?"

Beech hesitated. "She'll be back with me."

"Ay." Sol rubbed his chin thoughtfully. It was early for Sally to be gone from the place, and Beech's manner was peculiar; the big man jerked and twitched in his limbs, his eyes sought the horizon and were swollen and pouched from lack of sleep. "Good marnen'," said Sol. Beech merely nodded, turned on his heel, and went heavily but rapidly down through the fields. He felt certain that Sally had not gone by the lanes

where she would be seen. Solomon watched until the mist swallowed him up.

. . . . . .

Adam Stone had not offered to take any part in the exciting game of man hunting. Swainswick, suddenly fired with the lust of the chase inherent in man, had spread itself out on a wide trail intent upon running down its murderous quarry. The stonemason saw Sophie's light go out, then stole down once again to the cottage to learn whether Burridge had run to cover there. He had not. Adam had been the only one to see Burridge's hand in the attempt at murder, and his suspicion had grown out of a false foundation. Now that he felt perfectly sure who the assailant was he resolved to assist him in his escape. His sympathies were wholly with the jilted youth, and believing that the attack upon Barrow was deliberate he recognized that Burridge was no worse felon in intent than he was himself. Swearing the old woman to secrecy he told her what he suspected and bade her go to bed, but lie awake in case Dick should come for food or money or a change of clothing. From his own pocket he left a sovereign for the fugitive. Adam was playing a dangerous game, but the mood was upon him and he had never been the man to count conse-

quences. From the cottage he went home, picked a stout staff, and set off upon the quest himself, working deliberately so as to ensure success.

He went to the tragic gateway, came back to Miss Trotter's, found the cottagers still awake, and chatted with them barely half an hour after Matthew Beech had paid his visit of inquiry. Adam struck the trail towards Pottersham, from time to time hearing calls from other trackers and the barkings of lurcher dogs that some had brought with them. These sounds, coming weirdly and menacingly through the darkness, warned Adam of the paths that the fugitive would flee from and which he must not follow. He went slowly, often beating about for signs—a broken hedge, a foot-mark in the soft bank of a meadow brook, a trodden patch of rushes, or a trackway of freshly bruised stems in the bracken that covered the surface of the woodlands. But Dick had run by terror, not by reason, so although at one time Adam stood above the plantation where the hunted man was sleeping, he failed to find him.

. . . . . .

Dick Burridge slept almost till noon. He awoke to hunger and horror, seeing himself as Cain, naked and unarmed, and every man's hand against

him. The rain dribbled down upon him and he sat abject, starving, desolate. Opposite on the hill late corn waved, beckoning for the scythe, and a field of turnips tempted him to go forth; but he dared not venture. He huddled himself into the smallest possible bundle, casting furtive glances around at every sound. For a time his terrors were acute, but as nothing broke into his sanctuary, late in the afternoon he fell heavily asleep again.

Once more he awoke, crying out loudly, for he had had a bad dream. Opposite to him, stolid and unwinking, sat a man, a gamekeeper, with a gun across his knee. The man nodded. "So you'm awake at last."

Burridge stared as a trapped animal stares, his mouth wide open in the dumbness of terror. "Thought you never was goin' to open your blinkers," pursued the man. "Come across your tracks about dree o'clock, I did; reckoned it would be you all right."

"Who?" gasped Burridge.

"Look at your hands, man, and doan't ax silly questions."

Burridge looked and shuddered. The blood was on them yet; he had forgotten to wash it away. The man rose up, his eyes keenly fixed

on the fugitive. "Now look here, my boy; this gun be loaded. You'll go quietly about five paces ahead o' me, and the first time you breaks into a run, I fires. D'ye understand?"

Burridge licked his dry lips. "Wher' be takin' I to?"

"The maister's; he's a magistrate. After that the constable'll see 'ee safe in Peterminster gaol."

The wretched fellow's head dropped and he began to cry—a hopeless whining snivel that had its pathos.

"Hungry?" asked his captor.

"Starvin'!"

"Here's a lump of bread and cheese. I'll buy 'ee a pint of ale at the 'King's Head' as we goes along. The last beer you'll get, I reckon."

Burridge grabbed the food tossed to him. "Is he dead?" he asked, and terror stood in his eyes as he awaited the answer.

"Not yet."

"Thank God! I bain't a murderer; thank God!" he cried.

"Didn't ye mean it, then?"

"I didn't mean him at all, s'elp me God, I didn't! A frightened me, come upon me unawares, and 'twas dark!"

The gamekeeper looked incredulous. "Folks be tellin' a different tale."

"Then 'tis a lie! Mine be God's truth, I tell 'ee. 'Twas her I was after."

"Ah! And who be her?"

"Why—why—her!"

"Just so!" commented the other. "And now, if you'm ready we'll make a start. I won't forget the ale. Dare say the landlord'll offer a pint just for the sake of sayin' as how he'd done such a thing. Up ye gets!"

Burridge stood up, stiff and aching in every limb, and unable, for a moment, to take a step. His captor waited. "It'll be a slow march at first, I reckon. And just remember what I said about shootin'. I shall do it."

"Yes, yes," mumbled Burridge; "we needn't hurry, eh? I'd like to smell the fields as long as I can. Used to it all my life, d'ye see; an'—an' I loves it in a way. If I goes slow and haves a look about me you won't mind?"

"Not unless I thinks ye be lookin' for cover to dodge into." He looked cunningly at Burridge, but the poor wretch's face was vacant in a day-dream of country sounds and sights and smells. He prodded him with the barrel of his gun. "'March!' is the word."

Burridge roused himself, smiled stupidly, and marched.

. . . . . .

Sleep, that had flown from the pillow of the unhappy and conscience-stricken Sally, beat no drowsy wings above the head of Julia Carden. All the livelong night she lay wide-eyed and staring, her hearing strained to catch every sound that filtered through the wall. A quick footstep across the bedroom floor, the rapid hurrying of a woman down the stairs, sharpened her pain to an agony. Anxiety, jealousy, love, a fierce rebellion against her fate lacerated her heart; yet through the torture of all conflicting passions the supreme passion of love surged triumphant. She told herself that this love was only duty. A man had saved her life; now his own life was in the direst jeopardy. Already her hands had gone out to fight for him. She had withdrawn them; they should be stretched forth again and no other woman's should minister to him; pride in herself and gratitude to him demanded so much.

She rose with the dawn and knocked at the door of the room where Jasper was lying, once again on the verge of unconsciousness. A voice, guarded in its softness, bade her come in. With

an effort she entered, and found herself at last looking into the unveiled eyes of the woman whom she regarded as a secret but powerful influence in the life of the man she loved, withholding him from her. An instant challenge leapt into the eyes of both, then the woman rose from the bed and came to meet her.

She took her hands, and for a swift but searching moment of time grey eyes looked into blue and blue into grey, seeking to read what secret lay in the depths. The woman spoke. "You do not know me, Miss Carden. I am Helen Beech." Some of the usual softness was wanting in the tones of the voice, and the speaker evidently awaited an effect from her words.

"Beech!" echoed Julia, her voice attuned to the sick-room whisper and her brain ignoring all but the surname of the woman.

"The wife of Matthew Beech," added the other, and the challenge lit up in the blue eyes again. Julia mistook its import, for it was only the challenge of a proud, clean-souled woman to that pride of a maid that might condemn her. The girl, wearied with her own miseries, could find nothing to say. She looked at the bed where Jasper lay white and still. A new question haunted her. How, if he were stabbed walking with

Sarah Burdock, should this woman nurse him? She turned to her. "Why are you here?"

Before replying, Helen Beech went to her patient, listened to his breathing and laid a cool hand upon his forehead. "We shall not disturb him," she whispered, "and I cannot leave him; yet there is something that you and I must make clear." Very quietly she put Julia into a chair. "You have not slept; you will be ill," she said gently. Again she took Julia's hands and looked into her eyes; she had drawn aside the curtains, and through the window which looked south-east the first rays of the sun were stealing and playing around the golden hair. Julia looked upon it wonderingly, but the woman had not posed herself for effect and was unconscious of the picture imprinted in the brain of the other. "I must ask you one question," said she. "Do you love him?" Julia trembled; so they were to talk about a man without a name!

The question was almost cruel in its bluntness. She could answer it to her own heart, but what could she say to the woman who asked? Why had she asked, and what answer did she hope to hear? Again she sought the secret of the blue eyes, and quickly she realized all the beauty there was in the face, with its sadness and the printings

of time shown sharp and clear in the revealing sun of the morning. "Why do you ask me?" she said.

The woman answered without any hesitation and with no faltering words. "Because I love him as a woman may love the man she is old enough to read and understand, but whom she is too old to marry even if she were free to do so. I am not free. I do not desire him, because that would not bring him happiness. He may die!"

"No! no!" Julia clung to the woman as though she could save him.

"His life hangs by a thread. I have seen death, and know the borderland between it and life. If you do not love him, then I shall nurse him, but if——"

The rest was never spoken, for the truth in the woman called to the truth in the maid. She threw herself into the other's arms. "I do love him; I must love him even if he never loves me. Why has he not seen it and spoken? Oh! the hours have been agonies since that morning in the lane."

Helen Beech had heard what she wanted to hear. She had guessed Jasper's secret, and he had babbled in delirium in the early hours, saying all there was in his heart to say before Burridge had

stricken him down as he went to plead with the maid herself. She gathered the girl closer to her bosom, caressed her, kissed her; and presently she whispered her own story, which was only the prologue to the story of the wounding of Jasper, the flight of Sally, and the gyves closing upon the wrists of Burridge.

CHAPTER XXX

WAITING

THE harvest of passion had been reaped in the valley. The tragedy of a farmer, a maid, a half-drunken peasant, and an innocent gentleman-victim had shocked the soul of a simple people, stirred its memories, and loosened its tongues. There was an emptying of many ale cups in nightly foregatherings. Burridge awaited the assize judge in Peterminster prison; they could speculate upon his fate. Sally had vanished; they could picture her stiff and still in the deeps of chilling pool, tossed a thing of pity upon the Severn tide, mangled in some quarry gap, or lying dumb and stark and staring amidst the mouldering leaves of some woodland solitude.

From time to time Beech passed them, moody, stooping, and careworn; they could point to the visible effects of the workings of a human conscience. The Master of Sheepdene lay helpless,

with the beauty of the valley transformed to an angel of devotion and tenderness hovering about him; this was a picture that the women and maids painted for one another. The valley and the hills had been stirred out of a long somnolence of monotony; they would slumber again, but not yet.

Adam Stone was the one man whose mental state had given him a vision of ominous red on the hands of Dick Burridge, yet to him, when passion was past, the shock of the crime was most acute. Heated dreams are one thing; cold reality another. He had lifted his hand against the life of a man, and had meditated doing so again and with more certainty. Now he saw that killing was murder. The bloody vision sent him shuddering back into sanity. He knew that some tongues wagged about him and that questioning eyes cast furtive glances. He began to set a watch upon himself.

Tender-hearted little Sophie suffered in silence. Old Jane had long before shattered all her dreams of a dark prince out of fairyland, and occasional glimpses of Miss Carden on the back of the magnificent Beauty told her that the betrothal gift was accepted. The story she had had from the glib tongue of Peter, a rascal whose opera-

bouffe gasconadings had failed to make any impression upon so shy and gentle a nature as was hers.

Even the moody stonemason, when once his vision was cleared, saw so much and redeemed himself a little by a return to gentle courtesies in dealing with Sophie.

But Adam did not become the normal peasant, for there was something in his blood and birth that fitted him but ill for that station of life to which Fate had called him. He saw more of Matthew Beech; he heard more of Sally Burdock. With no longer a vengeance of his own to nurse he brooded over the sorrows of others.

Beech had failed in all his first searchings for Sally, and the women who had reviled her now turned upon him, declaring that if he had left the girl alone she would have been alive and content with Burridge, whilst that unhappy wretch would be white-washing his cottage for a bride. Beech was the evil genius of his own story and the gossips did not spare him. The burly shoulders of the farmer bent beneath the burden they were called upon to bear. He stooped visibly to all eyes; he dragged his heavy limbs as though shackles clogged them. The house was the desolation of emptiness. Sally had filled it; the spirit of the

place had fled with her that morning into the drizzling rain.

Yet Beech nursed hopes against the dictates of reason and his own intuition, and to Adam he spoke of them. He wandered forth into wood and copse and hollow, and among the remote places on the hills. He was an uneasy ghost seeking its fellow. Each night he left the lamp burning in the kitchen and the door on the latch. Dawn found him downstairs looking for a sign of a visit from the woman he had lost; and the cheeping sparrows in the mists of the morning more than once heard his voice quietly calling amongst the sheds and the barns. Beech was not violently in love with Sally; he was too obese in mind and body for emotional passion; but she had filled up the emptiness of his life, loved him at the last, and the heroic tragedy of their parting touched the best that was in him. Hence the pitiful searchings and the beckoning light in the window that bred flippant gibes and bitter sarcasms in the mouths of the gossips.

But out of it also came Adam Stone with an offer to spend a week in searching for the lost woman. Beech gladly accepted, for Adam's breath of hope set his own astir once more. They talked the matter over and the stonemason de-

cided to try towards the river where the farmer had searched at the first. Sol Gosling and Job Woodyatt had been curious observers of the conference between the two men, for the meeting had taken the form of an hour's walking to and fro in one of Beech's fields. The farmer had grown to hate the solitude of his house and seldom sat indoors during the hours of daylight.

The two cronies were under the lee of a field barn, ruminating and watching, and wondering how much longer they might risk leaving the wheat ricks unthatched. The more absorbing human topic quickly engrossed them. There was a two-handled cup of cider lying at Job's elbow. He took a pull at the drink and passed the cup on to Sol. The old man drank and rubbed the back of his hand across his stubby mouth. "Better have took up again wi' number one when her come along and offered," he said; "it is written somewhere in the Book that the first shall be also the last."

Job shook his head. "She was never his true mate; Sally was. Is t'other 'un gone for good?"

"Ay, never comin' no more. 'Twas I as took his word to her. Her trembled a bit and went chalk white and says, 'He's right, Solomon, I was wrong.'"

"And farmer reckons as Sally be dead?"

"Ay."

"In the naked truth way of speakin' she've gone and made away wi' herself?"

"Ay."

Job slowly filled his pipe and moved a few yards away from the haystack. "What's your opinion on woman and love making?" he asked.

"Never took much thought on't, but just had the one as was fated to me," answered Sol, sitting on a wagon shaft and filling his own pipe.

"Ay," said Job, and smoked a dozen or so of thoughtful puffs. "Fated is a good word!" He smoked on again and Sol kept in "puff" with him.

"The true word, eh, carter?"

Job nodded agreement and watched the last patch of uncut corn curtseying and kissing, golden head making love to golden head. There was a minute or so of philosophic contemplation. "Reckon Adam wasn't axed nothin' about Eve."

"Just a surprise for 'un when a' woke up wi' a pain in his side, I'll be bound."

"And a' took her as her was, never worritin' about fair or dark, short or tall, stout or lean."

"Just took her—and thanked the Lord!"

"Mankind have changed, Solomon."

"Just about!"

"The men must be a-choosin' and the women must be a-choosin'."

"So many danged bodies a-temptin' of 'ee, carter."

"Just an orchard full o' fruit, Solomon; and ther's some as'll pick off the first tree, and others as'll go through the orchard and gather crabs after all."

"The world's full of the belly-ache."

"I reckon ye was wise to take what was fated for 'ee. Now this love makin' is a dam'd tangle. If 'twas ordained so from the beginning it ought to go more smooth like." Sol agreed. Job went on. "Take Sallly Burdock. A woman must have a man, accordin' to nature; and when her grows up enough to know the cravin' her looks round for the man to come along and offer." Sol nodded again. "The man as comes first bain't always took, but the woman feels a bit soft towards 'un; he opens her eyes wide to herself, so to speak. Maybe others comes along, all tellin' her, 'You be man-fit now, and one of us wants 'ee.' This goes on till her puts a hand on one on 'em and says, 'I'll take thee.'"

"That's the very measure on't," cried Sol; "we all helps to make the woman—and one man gets her!"

"And not always the right man."

"How dost account for it, carter?"

Job sipped the cider and passed the cup for Solomon to finish it. "Seems to I 'tis the fault of the woman not waitin' to be showed herself fully. Full of ups and downs of the spirit a woman is; her wants, and her doan't want; 'tis this way wi' 'em and that way. Come along at the right moment, and her'll have thee; take the wrong moment and 'tis 'No, thank 'ee!' pretty sharp. Now here's Sally. I know of a main few who axed her. Why did her say 'Yes!' to Dick Burridge? Because he deserved it?"

"Not a dam'd ha'porth! Comed along at the wantin' minute, I reckon."

"Well, then, farmer comes along. He's the right man. Her says 'Yes' to 'un."

"I upheld her ther'," cried Sol. "Jane and I have had words about it."

"Sally tried to do right for herself and a man when her seed it. Do 'ee agree?"

"Ay."

"Then wher's the dam'd sense in Nature to go and put murder in Dick's heart? He've laid maister in the shadow of death; 'tis transportation for himself; Sally's dead and Matthew Beech a

broken man. And all because a wench had one too many a-makin' love to her."

"'Tis past a plain man's understandin', carter."

"Now, ther's maister——"

"He's safe!" exclaimed Sol.

"I'm thinking of this love-makin' game."

"So be I. Now I tell 'ee—quiet and secret like—they two be fated. His fate was showed to 'un afore he had time to sleep under his own roof. Nothin' was ever so pat as the matin' of they two."

"The thing bain't settled, surely!"

"'Tis, by now. The lady fought a bit at first, but Fate was too strong. Wouldn't have 'un in her bed, so to speak; now she be drawin' 'un into it out of the very grave."

"And he's willin'?"

"We'll have the handsomest missus in the valley afore Christmas comes along. My old woman's a-seein' cradles in the fire today. A night or two ago ther' was coffins a-jumpin'."

"Jane's a far-seein' woman, and if she says 'tis so, well, 'tis so."

Sol creaked his old limbs upwards. He glanced critically along the wheat ricks. "Reckon we won't start thatchin' today, carter?"

Job reflected. "Better let the breeze play through it a bit longer?"

"Wind's in a good quarter."

"The marnen' will be soon enough, then."

"Reckon it will. You might bring the cup up for a drop more cider. Maybe Jane'll tell 'ee all about what's goin' on in the house down yonder."

CHAPTER XXXI

ADAM AS KNIGHT ERRANT

TRUE to his promise Adam Stone had set off on his quest after Sally, and the gossips had another theme for speculation. The police also were searching for her as an important witness for the assizes, but they had abandoned any real hope of finding her. At first only Beech and Jim Watkin knew the reason for Adam's second disappearance, but when gossip began to couple Sophie's name with the event Watkin told her also. This championship of the cause of a lost and almost outlawed woman was a new light upon the sexton's character and touched the gentle heart of Sophie. She ofttimes found herself sitting and thinking of him and wondering where he was.

Adam was at the end of the fifth day of his search, and the strong hopefulness with which he had set out was almost gone. He had visited

the river at twenty different points, had asked questions at as many hamlets and villages, and talked with gipsy and Christian vagabond along the roadways. Hills were about him into whose recesses he had wandered that day some miles from the tideway.

Darkness came on and the lane began to wind and descend. There was the tinkle of running water from the never-failing springs in the heart of the ancient limestone. Owls hooted from adjacent coppices to the accompaniment of a harsh but not unmusical jangle of sheep bells. Stars studded a deep blue sky and a breeze came up cool and strong from the distant estuary towards which, once again, leg-weary and half-sleeping, Adam was wending a lonely way; he had come across traces of a wandering woman who might be Sally. Such faint guides he had followed before, only to find them end in disappointment.

Just before ten o'clock he stopped at an inn by some cross-roads, ate a frugal supper, and inquired of the landlord the nearest way to the river. The innkeeper looked at the weary man suspiciously. "It'll take 'ee dree miles," he answered.

"Thank 'ee," said Adam; "which is the way?"

"Follow the lane to the left. Ther's a smartish

common a bit along and boggy when 'tis wet. Lonesome place."

"Ay."

"And ther's a straggle of cottages with a chapel and a fairish house alongside of it. Queer sort o' preacher lives ther'; he built the chapel. After that ther's nothing till the river and the 'Hope and Anchor' alongside. Not the sort o' road you'd ask your best girl to meet 'ee in after dark."

"Ay, ay." Adam paid his reckoning and started off on the last stage of that day's pilgrimage. After his rest he walked rapidly, for it was not a road where one would linger. True to his nurture amidst the lonely hills, the big stonemason had a real fear of wide spaces that were empty of life and light and sound. The rustle of a leaf, an odd shape in tree or bush startled him. The "straggle o' cottages" thrust their squat, thatched forms out of the mirk. All were in darkness. The little chapel, a copy of the superstructure of Noah's Ark lifted out of its boat, came next, and then the preacher's house. Here a light shone. Adam stopped at the gate and leaned over. Beyond, the way was no better than a cart track, deep-rutted and grassy.

The preacher, hearing heavy footsteps stop at the gate and finding that no one knocked, opened

the door and looked out. He was a short and somewhat misshapen old man, with a clean-shaven, intelligent face, and a large head crowned by thin but waving white hair. The huge bulk of the stonemason dwarfed him ridiculously, but he showed no fear of the belated stranger. "Were you wanting me, friend?" he asked.

"Thank 'ee, sir, no; but perhaps you could tell me if I be right for the river."

"Yes."

"Much farther?"

"About two miles. Have you been walking long?"

"All day, sir."

"I shall be glad to give you a little rest and refreshment."

"I thank you kindly, sir, but I must be gettin' along. Good-night!"

"Good-night, my friend."

Adam swung off again and the door was closed. He had gone about a furlong when he was startled by the sound of someone running behind him. Quickly he dodged into the shadow of a rank-growing hedge and waited. In a minute the running figure was near enough to disclose itself as that of a woman, and Adam stepped into the middle of the lane again. Instantly his name was

called, and while his memory was struggling to recognize the voice the woman grasped his arms and peered into his face. "God A'mighty!" he gasped. "You, Sally!"

"Yes, yes, me, Adam, and oh! thank God for the sound of your voice, too." Sally was quivering like an aspen and her lips trembling with suppressed sobs. The stonemason put an arm round her to hold her. "You be alive!" he said wonderingly. "Wher'——"

"I was in the house, Adam. I heard 'ee talking. I've got out o' bed to come after 'ee. How be he, Adam, how be my poor dear man?" The trembling hands closed and unclosed their grip upon his.

"He's mournin' for 'ee, Sally."

"And you, Adam; you axed after the river. What do 'ee want with the river at this time o' night? Is it because of Sophie?"

"No, my dear, 'tis because of you. I be come after 'ee."

"After me!"

"Ay; farmer searched till his heart was almost dead, and then something told I that I might find 'ee. You'll come back now, Sally."

Sally thrust him from her. "I can't, Adam, I can't," she wailed.

Adam put an arm about her again. "But he do want 'ee, my dear."

"Ther's Dick and the judge." She shivered.

"Ther's a judge for us all; and 'tis His mercy that you be still alive."

"I couldn't do it after all. And I said I would. Do they think I be dead?"

Adam hesitated. "Yes," he answered.

"Then I be a coward."

"No," he said soothingly.

"Shall I tell 'ee how it was?"

"Ay, if tellin' will help."

"Then let us go a little way along; ther's a place wher' we can sit down."

Adam's arm told him how lightly the woman was clad. He mentioned the matter to her. She laughed wearily; "I bain't to die yet," she exclaimed. "The place is snug, too, a little grass tump with bushes round. It is the place wher' I do mostly sit. 'Tis only a little way."

They reached the place in a couple of minutes. Adam took off his thick corduroy jacket and insisted that she should sit upon it. For a moment or so Sally sat and cried quietly; then she asked, "What do 'ee think of I?"

"I bain't judgin' of 'ee, my poor wench."

"Ye bain't ashamed of sittin' by me here?"

For answer, Adam put out his hand and took hers, and Sally gripped it as though it were the anchor by which she held on to the life she had known. To her the sexton was a pillar of uprightness, for she knew nothing of the dark places of his mind; and to touch him brought about an anguish of yearning for her own man that seemed to burst her bosom. "Tell me," he said gently, and Sally began her tale.

"When I went away I meant to do it."

Adam nodded.

"But not that day. I wanted to be alive for just a little while to think of him and to ax God's forgiveness for what I was goin' to do. I said to myself I would see Sunday again, hear the Word read, and then I would do it."

Adam again nodded.

"I got here on the Sunday on my way to the river, and I hid about until the folks went into chapel. When they began a-singin' I went inside. Seemed to I that if I went to eternity with the words of hymns and prayer in my ears God might forgive me."

The sexton offered no remark on this curious piece of reasoning. Sally waited and then went on less hopefully. "I liked the preacher, and I thought I'd stay for the sermon; maybe ther'd be

a word o' comfort in it. When I heard the text I wanted to run out."

"What was it?"

"'The wages of sin is death.'"

"Ah!"

"For some ther' was forgiveness; but for others it was hell, no matter how ye prayed."

"Blasphemy!" said Adam.

"He said that, but most of his words were too hard to follow, and I knowed I hadn't done it." Sally paused, and Adam felt her trembling again. "Which touched 'ee, Sally?" he asked.

"He said—may God forgive me for thinkin' of such a thing!—he said ther' was no forgiveness for self-murderers."

Adam leaned forward, suddenly absorbed by a new interest. "I once heard a Methody man say that in Hillborough," he remarked. "How did the preacher put it? I noticed he'd got a biggish head and thought then ther'd be wisdom in it."

"Ther' is," said Sally warmly, "but ther's more goodness in his heart. He saved I from the pit."

"I'd like to hear his words."

"I can't mind 'em all, but 'twas something like this. If a man killed another the police would take 'un, the judge judge 'un, and the law would hang 'un. Ther'd be eye for eye and tooth for

tooth accordin' to Bible law, and the Almighty would be sort of satisfied."

"That's reasonable."

"But if a man took his own life which God had given ther' was nothin' left for 'un to pay with and so to hell he must go. Do 'ee agree, Adam?"

The sexton peered into the tear-stained, frightened eyes. "I don't see no other end to the argument," he said solemnly, and Sally bowed her head.

"And I was a-goin' to do it!" she murmured in a whisper of horror.

"But ye didn't, my dear."

"No. I stayed behind when the folks went out. He came to me, and I was just about cryin' my heart out. I told 'un everything and he kept with me till I could kneel down and pray. I went into supper wi' 'un, and we prayed again. Oh! Adam, if I had done it and gone to hell I should have lost my man for all eternity! I couldn't lose 'un!"

"God knowed ye was too good for that, my dear." Adam, mindful of his own sins, took Sally's hands from her face and held them to comfort her. "Why didn't 'ee come back to us then?" he said.

"I couldn't. The preacher begged I to do so.

I can't. I do feel that the blood of two men be on my hands."

"What will 'ee do then?"

"I doan't know," moaned Sally hopelessly.

"What have 'ee been doing? 'Tis nigh upon dree wiks."

"I have stayed wi' the preacher, workin' and cleanin' for 'un. Day after day I do say to myself I be a burden on a good man and must go away. But if I do leave 'un I feel I shall leave hope again."

Adam sat in thought. "Suppose farmer comed for 'ee," he said, and he felt a thrill go through her body. She panted for utterance.

"Would he come, Adam, would he?"

Adam made his hazard of Beech's manhood. "He'll come," he said.

"And I must face the judge and—and Dick?"

"Yes."

"'Twill be awful, Adam."

"'Tis the penalty. Be brave and pay it."

Sally tried to face the situation. Adam spoke again. "Can't 'ee make up your mind to come back willin' without bein' fetched?"

Sally hesitated. "Would it be better?"

"Ay, and I should like it."

"I want to please 'ee, Adam, and I want to

please him; but I waited for 'un all that dreadful night and he didn't come!"

"He have sought for 'ee ever since, and each night ther's the lamp in the window for 'ee."

Sally choked back a sob. She rose up, cold and shivering. "I mustn't die, and oh! my God, 'tis lonely without 'un. You be sure he wants me?"

"I be sure." Adam wrapped his jacket about her.

"I doan't deserve it, Adam."

The sexton took her arm and together they walked back to the cottage. The light still burned, for the preacher had heard Sally go out by way of the kitchen, and Adam's inquiry for the river had almost at once linked the two together in his mind.

With the dawn Sally turned homewards, with Adam to comfort her by the way. It was a long tramp and they took the unfrequented lanes. Night had fallen when they came over the hill behind Sheepdene, and in body and mind the woman was wearied almost to the point of utter exhaustion. Below them, half hidden by the twisted fruit trees of the orchard, lay the farmhouse. Sally leaned over a low field wall and looked down through the greyness of the night.

Home called to her heart but fear held her by the feet.

"Is she coming back again?" she asked. Adam understood the allusion to Beech's wife.

"Never," he said; "they've done wi' one another."

A light appeared in a window. "That's the call to 'ee," whispered Adam. He took her arm and led her down over the fields in silence. They reached the gate of the little garden leading to the house door. Sally clutched at it. "You be comin' in," she whispered. Adam shook his head, and held out his hand for the "good-night." She took it, and her own hand was like ice. "My heart's hurtin' prapper bad; I can't go in," she said. The door latch clicked and Beech came slowly and stoopingly into the night. His eyes lighted upon the grey ghostlike figure of the stonemason and he called to him with a voice that had a ring of startling fear in it.

Adam opened the gate and thrust Sally in. Beech saw, and held out his hands; hands that trembled lest his eyes saw only a mocking vision. But the heart cry, "Matthew! Matthew!" reassured him. Sally stumbled forward to him and fell in a swoon at his feet.

Adam turned sharply on his heel and strode away to Swainswick. Was there a maid there who would put her love into her voice and cry out his name?

CHAPTER XXXII

THE MENDING OF BROKEN VESSELS

In a quaint room under a sunny gable of the old house by the mill stream, love and a deep devotion were working to snatch a soul out of the valley of the last shadows, and time and again the thick darkness threatened to close round the life and engulf it. For many days and nights only the faintest gleams of hope illumined the struggle. Jasper had bled badly, and only the inherent vitality of youth enabled him to rally against the exhaustion that sank him gravewards. Through this time of crisis Julia fought as only can fight the woman who has made the great surrender to love. She had given herself with the questions that had tortured her all unanswered, and she was content to leave the man to realize the gift that had come to him.

When the crisis had passed there followed a time of great weakness, when long stretches of the day passed with the patient lying wakeful and listless,

the dark eyes wandering round the room. These hours Julia could not endure, not only from the ache they brought to her heart but because of a shyness that beset her when Jasper was awake. Almost invariably she quitted the room, leaving her aunt or old Jane in charge. Thus it was that for some time Jasper had no means of realizing the change that had come over her. She would sit with him all night with the light dim and shaded and he for the most part sleeping fitfully. And during sleep, dreams would come and the man would speak secrets that filled her heart with happiness.

All this while Gipsy Barrow was in and out of the house at his own will and pleasure. It was plain to all that the old man's happiness was bound up with the life of his gentleman son. He hovered about Julia like some protective brown eagle, his eyes alight with a smile for her, his hands for ever caressing the dark thick waves of her hair. The grey eyes put off their veil for him so that he knew that Beauty would be in truth a bridal token. The gipsy had the happy gift of winning hearts, and Julia grew to look for him as restlessly as he looked for her. In his presence no pride stiffened her, and he was warmed by a soft charm of maidenly affection that storm clouds had hidden

from his son. But he knew what love-fires were glowing for Jasper, ready to break forth when the magic words were spoken.

The old man, bizarre as a figure from a pageant, was walking beside Julia in the garden; she, pale with many a vigil, so that the blush rose-flower of her maidenhood was changed to the fairer and more alluring white. "The big Lord God Almighty is good to my boy," he cried. "You love him, my queen, do you not?"

"Yes," answered Julia, facing him with the honest openness that shames coquetry.

"And he loves you, my heart. There are no cold springs in a gipsy's bosom; the blood is hot, but the fires do not go out. I loved his mother. She lay in these arms" (he spread them out with a fine gesture); "they would wither if I folded them about the body of another woman. So will it be with my boy. Now he is weak and ill, but the man, the lover, will rise up as the man's strength comes back. Then he will take you in his arms; his breast will be your pillow, and it will be yours only until the long last night comes upon him. Do you believe that, my dear?"

"Yes," said Julia; she smiled a little sadly. "He makes the warm love to me in his dreams; I listen, but he does not know."

"Ah! but the waking!"

"It will come!"

Jane Gosling flustered in and Julia went to her. "How be the maister?" Jane asked.

"Better and stronger."

"Have he said the words yet?" The old eyes betrayed her eagerness.

Julia sighed. "I won't let him." She paused. "Jane," she said, "you and Solomon are happy?"

"Bless 'ee, yes!"

"But Helen Beech?"

"She doan't count; they never loved!"

. . . . . .

Jasper was awake, the animation of returning strength shining eloquently from eyes that looked darker than ever against the pallor of his cheeks. Julia, who had been sitting by the window reading, sprang to her feet when she heard him moving. She went quickly to the bedside, the cheery smile of the hopeful nurse sweetening the curve of her lips and love for the moment unveiled in her glances. Deftly she adjusted the pillows, murmuring, "You have slept beautifully."

"Yes," replied Jasper.

"And now I will see what auntie has ready for you," she added cheerily, giving the pillow a last smoothing with her fingers.

"No," said Jasper, seizing the hands before she could escape. A vivid blush flooded Julia's cheeks and she looked shyly into Jasper's eyes. "No," he repeated, with a firmness that had been absent from his voice for many weary days. "You always run away when I wake up, and yet you watch me every hour of sleep. Why is it, Julia?"

"Auntie is a better nurse than I am."

"In my eyes you are a thousand times better." Very gently he pulled her close to him, put an arm about her so that she bent down above him. Then, without a word, he kissed her full upon the trembling lips. "Have you been trying to cry 'quits,' dear, for Pottersham lane?"

"No."

"You found me in the meadow."

"Sarah Burdock was nursing you."

"You brought me here instead of taking me to my own house."

"It was nearer, and Sarah helped. She took off her clothes to make a bed for you."

Jasper smiled. "You bound up my hurts."

"She did more than I."

"You have nursed me like a dear angel of mercy, and like other angels you fly away when I awake from my dreams of you. Why have you done so much for me, dear?"

Julia's head touched the pillow beside his. "Because of Midsummer Eve."

"Yes?"

And then her arms went suddenly about him in an embrace that awoke the pain in his wounds again. "Oh! my darling, because I love you so," she cried. Jasper turned and nestled to her and reverently he kissed her lips and eyes again and again. "Now," he whispered, "I am going to tell you two stories." He told her all about Sophie and Adam and the fight upon the Beacon; he gave her each particular of the visits of Helen Beech, and she listened to every word, although Helen had already told her own story. He opened his heart so that she might know all the thoughts of her that he had cherished. Then she returned his kisses and told her story also. For a while after that there was silence. "Is there anything more I ought to say, darling?" whispered Jasper.

"Say again 'I love you!'"

. . . . . .

The return of Sally Burdock did not achieve its uninterrupted run of a nine days' interest. Adam's share in the chapter of romance became known, and the sexton became a greater puzzle than ever.

His subsequent behaviour deepened the enigma. He shut himself in his stoneyard or cottage, answered no questions, and forsook the "Yew Tree," sending his lad for noon-ale and supper beer. Folks began to look at Sophie until their questioning glances hurt her; it seemed impossible that the dog-like devotion of years should suddenly have ceased for ever. One night she heard steps in the yard after she had gone to bed. Tremblingly she peeped through the window. Adam stood at his familiar post at the gate between the ancient elders, the light of a young moon upon him. For an hour he stayed there, and then she heard him stealing away again. After that she left her light burning, knowing that her old lover was there to keep vigil until her window was in darkness. Yet, though the days and nights sped away, his heavy steps never sounded along the sanded passage to the kitchen. Dicky Babs was willing to talk to her by the hour about the mystery, and Sophie always found time to listen.

Sol Gosling and Job Woodyatt stopped for a drink on the way back from Hillborough, and the old man strolled across the road for a talk with Adam. His visit was a brief one, and he soon returned to more congenial company. Jim Wat-

kin had watched the proceedings. "How be he, gran'feyther?" he asked.

"Might be spellin' out our epitaphs for all the cheerfulness ther's in 'un," answered Sol.

"What did a' say?"

"Just 'yes' or 'no' if you axed 'un a question twice. Civil enough, mind 'ee, but no great matter of words."

"Chewin' something over that sticks to his teeth," said Job.

"Might try a word wi' 'un," suggested Watkin.

Job rose up. "I'll just pass the time o' day wi' 'un to show we be all neighbourly; and I seed Sally thease marnen'."

"How be she?"

"Like a woman as have had a bad dream and bain't quite wakened up," replied the carter, and sallied across the road. His visit was as brief as Sol's, and he held out his hand for the ale cup before giving his report. "Reckon you can just size he up to the figure of the man's owl," he said.

"Ay," ejaculated Watkin.

"A divvle to think but a poor sort o' dab at talking," answered Job, and finished his beer. "He did go so far as to tell I he'd be bringing a new stone step down to Miss Trotter's this afternoon."

"Then he's likely to see the pretty picter of two

fond lovers a-coortin'," said Sol; "never seed less daylight between the bodies of man and maid in all my life!"

"'Tis wonderful how little elbow-room lovers want for walkin' and sittin'," commented Job.

"Ay, ay," said Sol, "'tis both on the same chair to begin with, but Lord, 'tis soon the full width of the hearth between 'em. We'll be gettin' along, carter."

The two drove off. Dicky Babs went into the house kitchen to dangle his legs from the window seat and watch Sophie cooking the dinner.

Adam and his boy went down to Miss Trotter's with the new step.

And the stonemason was back again by tea time. He had seen, and his heart had read some passages of a love-idyll by the side of the murmuring stream. Cleansing himself from stone-dust he went thoughtfully into his lonely kitchen. His tea was laid, but surely not by the hands of the neighbour who usually ministered to him. The tablecloth was snow white and prettily bordered; the cup and saucer, the plates, the knife, the spoon, were not the clumsy things from his bachelor cupboard; they were far, far finer, and to the wondering man they looked new. His breath came quickly and the pulse throbbed hard

in his temple. His chair was placed, the kettle sang on the hob; odours came from the little side oven. He walked round the table. In the petals of purple pansies beside his plate was the letter "S." Sophie had repeated her love charm. The big stonemason shook like a leaf and his dusky face crimsoned. What did it all mean? Had she been in the house? He called, gently, hesitatingly.

The call was answered. There was the rustle of a gown behind the old, high-backed settle. Adam's heart seemed to stop beating, and his hand tapped an unsteady, uncontrolled tattoo on the table. Sophie stepped forth, pale as a lily, fairer than the fairest flower in her garden, and there was in the beautiful brown eyes a dew that Nature cannot bestow upon the most exquisite blooms. She stood by the table, stretched out two hands, and whispered, "Adam!"

"My—my dear, my dear!" he stammered, and then neither word nor movement was left in him.

"Adam!" the appeal came again. Dizzily he went towards her, looked into her eyes, and took her hands. He did no more than this; he could not, for he did not understand. But the maid could read the tremendous yearning in his looks and knew his heart was wholly hers. And she knew her own heart at last. Like a bird she

fluttered to his bosom, but her song was only one little sob in her throat. And the man realized in one glorious vision all his future. "And you be come to me, my love, my love?" he cried.

"If you will forgive me, dear, and have me," she murmured.

"Forgive 'ee!" he laughed a full-throated laugh, reckless with joy. "Forgive 'ee, my lovely little one! Why, 'tis on my knees I'll go and ask 'ee to bless me." And he would have knelt, but a little hand stopped him with a touch.

"We must kneel to God, my dear," she said.

And he laughed again, a daring defiant laugh. "Why, I doan't want God if I've got you!" He lifted her face from his breast and fed, as it were, his very soul from it. Then he kissed her—with such passion, such abandon, that even in her joy she trembled for herself and for him feeling almost like a tiny jewel of a firefly flitting near the mouth of a furnace.

FINIS

THE NEW YORK SOCIETY LIBRARY

The Golden Slipper

And Other Problems for Violet Strange

By

Anna Katharine Green

12°. Frontispiece by A. I. Keller. $1.35

The dominant figure in this series of detective stories is a young girl, Violet Strange —detective *par excellence.* She observes sharply, thinks intensely, and has the faculty of disentangling, out of a maze of perplexing circumstances, the one explanation that accords with facts, and carries out her reasoning with the most consummate ability.

The author wrote "The Leavenworth Case" nearly forty years ago, and ever since has steadily maintained an important position among writers of fiction.

G. P. Putnam's Sons

New York **London**

A
Rogue by Compulsion

An Affair of the Secret Service

By

Victor Bridges

A story all action, though told in a manner that wins the reader through its confident ease and lack of artificiality. From the moment when Mr. Lyndon, the wrongly imprisoned hero, leaps over the wall and falls to safety, narrowly escaping the pursuing shot, to the time when, the joint captor of a band of spies, with whom he has, in ignorance of their real motives, worked in enforced association, he receives the thanks of the nation, there is not a dull page. A secret workshop on the marshes, the explosion of an island through an agency of destruction of which the hero is the inventor, a deliberate drowning, more than one attempt at assassination are but a few of the milestones of adventure that the reader passes in his swift pursuit of the tortuous trail of the story.

12°. With Frontispiece in Color. Net $1.35

G. P. Putnam's Sons

New York **London**

The Promise

A Tale of the Great Northwest and of a Man Who Kept His Word

By

James B. Hendryx

12°. Color Frontispiece. $1.35 net

A tale of a strong man's regeneration—of the transformation of "Broadway Bill" Carmody, millionaire's son, rounder, and sport, whose drunken sprees have finally overtaxed the patience of his father and *the* girl, into a Man, clear-eyed and clean-lived, a true descendant of the fighting McKims.

After the opening scenes in New York, we have a vivid narrative of the lumber-camps of the Northwest—of the work of strong men—of hardships undergone and of dangers met bravely and passed—of the struggle against heavy odds, and of the making good of the "Man Who Could Not Die."

G. P. Putnam's Sons

New York **London**

On the Fighting Line

By Constance Smedley

12°. 500 pages. $1.35

The spirit of the book breathes in this address with which the heroine turns in the hour of her trial to the portraits of the heroes with which she has surrounded herself: "Fighting Line, you're men, but as long as I am brave and go on fighting the best I can, the best I know, I claim you as comrades, and I feel you saying: 'Buck up, go on,' just as you'd say to a man. There isn't an ounce of snivel or pity in your eyes. They say: 'It's a hard world and we've got to take our knocks alike, women and men, and never mind what anyone thinks of you. Courage is for everyone, women and men; truth is for everyone, women and men; honor is for everyone,—and it's the same sort of courage, truth, and honor too.'"

G. P. Putnam's Sons

New York **London**